

THE
OWL'S NEST

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To Father
from
Bessie

Aug 3, 1896

Chas. Spauld



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THE OWL'S NEST

A ROMANCE

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

OF

E. MARLITT

BY

MRS. A. L. WISTER

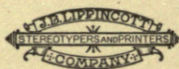


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THE OWL'S NEST.

THE hawthorns and syringas in the corners of the court-yard of the Gerold estate were a mass of bloom, the water of the fountain sparkling in the May sunshine plashed noisily in its stone basin, and the sparrows were chattering on the roofs of barns and stables. It really seemed that on this especial day everything was blooming and sparkling and chattering more loudly than ever in the Gerold court-yard, with a delightful sense of the comfort of home, for the bushes, the fountain, and the sparrows in their worn old nests were all going to stay; they were not driven hence, as were the spiders and moths from behind the antique chests and cupboards in the mansion itself. Yes, it looked forlorn enough in the house,—almost as if it were war-time; the walls were so bare, and there was such heaped-up confusion on the floor of the dining-hall. Everything that prudent housewives had collected of linen and bedroom furniture, all that their lords had gathered together of household ware, silver, and hunting implements, had to be carried into that room, to be submitted to the inspection of coldly scrutinizing eyes, and afterwards to be torn asunder and borne off to all quarters of the world.

The monotonous voice of the auctioneer, as it came through the open windows of the hall, sounded as if half stifled with dust from library shelves and from old furniture, and had in it something like insult,—“No. 1! No. 2!” etc. It was almost a wonder that at sound of it, with its legal twang, some one of the stern old warriors lying beneath the pavement of the family chapel did not start up from his slumber of centuries to enter his protest. Many a doughty fist was mouldering there which, in its time, had known well how to maintain by downright blows its owner's right to what of goods and gold he had won, or perhaps usurped. But the latest possessor of Geroldscourt, from whom everything not nailed to its place or built into the walls was now being dragged away, had gentler blood in his veins. He was a tall, handsome man, with a brow at once lined and ennobled by thought and study.

He was sitting at present in his quiet back room, in the corner where the syringas grew high above the windows. At every breath of wind the white blossoms tapped lightly on the panes; the closed windows shut out the noise and bustle of the auction-room, whence only an isolated sound now and then reached this secluded apartment.

Herr von Gerold was writing at a pine table, which had magnanimously been left to him from the household furniture. It was apparently of no consequence to him that his manuscript lay scattered on the scoured boards of a kitchen table; his mind, abstracted from the outer world, was absorbed in abstruse problems, while his hand traced small running characters on the paper; only when the syringa-blossoms brushed the window-panes persistently did his look grow more conscious, and become illuminated with something like

loving joy in the childish face upon which his eyes rested as he suddenly lifted them.

For there was some one besides himself in the room,—a pretty, fair-haired little girl, who had established herself in a corner by the window. The little thing was as completely wrapped up in her playthings as the writer was in his manuscript. She had gathered together in her corner all that belonged to her, and to her only,—the beautiful painted porcelain tea-set which the kind Princess had sent her, and all her dolls. Gorgeous ladies in trains, as well as the crying babies, had come at Christmas and on her birthday, packed in long boxes, and each time Aunt Claudine had addressed them on the covers herself, ‘To little Elizabeth von Gerold;’ papa had always read it off to her.

Little Elizabeth was now seated in the midst of her possessions as in a nest, her youngest baby in her arms, and her large blue eyes riveted anxiously upon the door by which the ‘horrid men’ had a little while before carried away the last pictures and the tall clock.

She patted her doll, but otherwise sat still as a little mouse; papa always looked so worried when she disturbed him in his writing. Not a sound came from her lips, when suddenly the dreaded door was noiselessly opened; the doll slipped down from her lap, the plump little creature arose from her basket-chair, and tripped across the room as fast as her legs could carry her,—to lift her arms, her little face beaming with delight the while, towards the lady who had entered.

Ah, she had come, Aunt Claudine,—her beautiful aunt,—whom she loved a thousand times better than she had ever loved Fräulein Duval, her governess, who had kept saying to the other people in the house, “*Fi*

donc! such a *pauvre* house is no place for Claire Duval," and who, before she left, had not been kind and polite to papa. Now she had gone, and the child had rubbed away from her cheek the cold, disagreeable kiss Fräulein Duval had given her. This was very different. Two soft arms lifted her up, and a sweet mouth kissed her tenderly. And then the young lady glided across the floor as noiselessly as she had entered, except for the soft rustle of her dark silk dress, and laid her hand upon the shoulder of the writer at the table.

"Joachim," she said, in a sweet, gentle voice, stooping to look into his face.

He started to his feet. "Ah, Claudine!" he exclaimed. "Little sister, dear child, you ought not to be here! You see, I can bear it easily,—I have already got over it; but it will pain you terribly, all this desolation, this scattering to the four winds of everything dear to you! Poor, poor child! How grieved I am to see your eyes filled with tears!"

"Only a tear or two, Joachim," she said, with a smile, although her voice trembled. "Old Dobbin is to blame for them,—our old letter-carrier, who brought us our mail every morning! Only think, the poor old brute knew me, as he was led past me just now——"

"Yes, and Peter is gone, aunt," said little Elizabeth; "he is not coming back; and the carriage is gone, and papa must run to the Owl's Nest."

"No, he need not run, darling, for I have brought a carriage with me," said Aunt Claudine, the consoler. "I will not take off my wrap, Joachim——"

"Indeed, I cannot ask you to in this house; I cannot even offer you any refreshment. The cook prepared our last soup at noon to-day, and then left for her new situation. Oh, I hoped you would be spared

the knowledge of all this! You will have hard work, dear, to forget it when you return to court."

She shook her head gently. "I am not going back to the court. I am going to stay with you," she declared.

He started. "What!—with me? To share my poor crust? Never, Claudine, never!" He stretched out his hand as if to thrust her away. "Our beautiful swan—the delight of our eyes, the joy of all hearts—fade away in the Owl's Nest? What do you take me for, to dream that I should allow such a thing? I go back gladly, and light of heart, to the old house,—*your* house, your inheritance, which you have so generously placed at my disposal. It will wear a face of kindest welcome to me, for I have my work, which transfigures everything, and sweetens frugal fare, and gilds the old walls; but you,—you?"

"I knew what you would say, and took the matter into my own hands," she said, firmly, looking at him with eyes that beamed with affection beneath their long lashes. "I know that you do not need me, quiet, contented hermit that you are, but what is to become of your little Elizabeth?"

He looked in a kind of terror at the child, who, in preparation for departure, was trying to put over her shoulders a little round calico cape, such as the Thuringian peasant women wear. "Fräulein Lindenmeyer is there," he said, with hesitation.

"Fräulein Lindenmeyer was grandmamma's faithful waiting-maid, and has all her life been as good as gold; but she is old and gray now, and we never could intrust the child to her. And what could the sentimental old creature teach, do you think?" she went on eagerly, while a melancholy smile stole over

his features. "No, let me atone for my error. I ought not to have gone to my dear old Princess; I ought to have refused the position at court, and have done my best to stem the tide of ruin here. Affairs looked gloomy enough at Geroldscourt long ago, before——"

"Before your brother most foolishly brought home a spoiled wife from Spain, who pined away for years in the German climate, until the angel of deliverance bore her away from a world of suffering,—eh, Claudine?" he completed her sentence, with a bitter sigh. "And he was, besides, no agriculturist, but a useless fellow, who studied the flowers of the field with his microscope, delighted in their beauty, and forgot that they were weeds that spoiled good pasturage. Yes, it is true, the estate could not have fallen into worse hands than mine, but am I entirely to blame? Is it my fault that there is in me no drop of the peasant blood which assimilated so well with the blue current that flowed in the veins of our ancestors? The plough won most of the Gerold wealth now scattered to the winds, but I must hang my head before the merest village day-labourer who cultivates his patch of potatoes in the sweat of his brow. I carry hence nothing save my pen and a handful of petty coins, which must provide my child and myself with bread until my manuscript shall be finished and sold. That is why I am writing with such feverish haste——"

He paused, and with a bitter smile laid his hands on the young lady's shoulders. "Yes, my darling sister, we two—the two last—are the ducks which that respectable domestic fowl, the ancient Gerold line, has hatched out at the close of its long earthly career. As children, we instinctively sought another element,—I, the 'dreamer,' a student and star-gazer, and you, the

nightingale with golden throat, a vision of grace and elegance. And now you come to the absent-minded bookworm that I am grown to be, and would fain creep with him into the Owl's Nest." He shook his head decidedly. "You shall not cross the threshold of the old house, Claudine! Drive home again! My legs are grown stiff, crouched up here in this corner to be out of the way of all the bustle; a walk to the Owl's Nest will do them good, and Friedrich, our faithful old Friedrich, will carry the child if she gets tired. And now a brief farewell, Claudine."

He opened his arms to embrace his sister in bidding her farewell, but she eluded them. "How do you know that I *can* go back?" she asked, gravely. "I requested my dismissal, and my request has been granted. My dear old Princess understood me, and, without asking a single question, knows exactly how matters stand. Be as discreet as she has been, Joachim,"—a flood of crimson dyed her cheeks,—“and silently accept the fact that there is another reason for my coming home besides my desire to be with you. Take me as I come to you, with my lips closed, but with my heart filled with faithful, sisterly affection, will you not?"

He drew her towards him without a word, and kissed her forehead.

She sighed as if relieved. "We shall have frugal fare," she went on, with a gentle smile, "but it will be our own. The Princess insists upon continuing my salary, and my grandmother's legacy yields some yearly income. We shall certainly not starve, and there will be no need in future for you to write with 'feverish haste.' No, that I will not have. You shall complete your precious work in peace and serenity, for your own amusement. And now let us begone."

She looked around the bare room, and her eyes rested upon a small trunk.

"Yes, that is everything that I have a legal right to call mine," said Herr von Gerold, following her eyes. "Not much more than the last representative of the Gerolds unconsciously laid claim to when he first appeared in the world,—necessary clothes for his person. And yet, no!—what base ingratitude!" He struck his forehead, and there was a happy gleam in his eyes. "Such a strange thing, Claudine! Think! Do you know of any friend of our family who could put his right hand into his pocket and give away a couple of thousand thalers without letting his left know anything about it? Rack my memory as I will, I know no one who could and would do it; no one in the world! Yesterday various chests were deposited in the next room,—chests which those who brought them said belonged to me, and which had been withdrawn from the auction by an agent of mine whom I had empowered to do so—I, beggar that I am! I think I laughed in the men's faces. But they left, and absolutely refused to carry the chests away. They contained my books, Claudine, my valuable little library, which it had broken my heart to see tossed into baskets by profane hands to be taken to the auction-room,—my beloved books, faithful companions of my solitude! Whoever rescued them from shipwreck ought to know that he has given back to me the very breath of my intellectual life, a sure staff for a wanderer in the desert, for which may he be thrice blessed! You cannot guess, can you, Claudine, who it is? Give it up; we neither of us can solve that riddle."

He put up his manuscript in the portfolio lying ready for it, and Claudine packed up Elizabeth's treasures in

a basket, assisted in her task by the child's small, chubby hands.

Ten minutes later this last asylum was deserted, and Herr von Gerold was walking along the corridor with his sister leaning on his arm and his child's hand in his.

A handsomer couple could scarcely be imagined than this brother and sister, hastening for the last time, and with downcast looks, through their ancestral home, the nest which had been added to and decorated by the Gerolds for centuries, and of which strange birds had now taken possession,—birds with golden feathers; for the estate had been bought by some unknown man for a very high price.

On the staircase they came upon a lady on her way from the wing where the auction was going on. She was carefully holding up the skirt of her brown gown, muttering in evident displeasure as she did so, for the dust lay thick upon the stairs, which had been ignorant of broom or brush during all these last days of bustle and confusion. She flushed with dismay when, looking up, she saw the pair before her.

"Beg pardon," she said, in a deep, harsh voice, retreating as she spoke. "I am blocking the way."

Herr von Gerold looked for a moment as if it were upon his lips to say, "Must I drink this cup, too, to the dregs?" But he controlled himself, and replied with a courteous inclination, "The way out of this house is only too open; a little delay should be welcome to us."

"The dirt on this staircase is terrible,—positively shocking!" the lady declared, as if she had not heard his reply, as she shook her skirts. "I never go to auctions, chiefly because you are sure to inhale such quan-

tities of ancient dust! But Lothar gave me no peace; he wrote to me twice that I must drive over here to secure the silver set. He will be surprised; they ran it up to an unheard-of sum." All this was rattled forth with cheeks alternately pale and flushed, and eyes all the while fixed upon the edges of her profaned skirts.

"For grandmamma's sake I am grateful to your brother for the purchase, Beata; she set great store by the old heirlooms," said Claudine.

"What else could he do? We have the other half of the set, and could not consent to have our crest stuck up in some pawnbroker's window," the lady rejoined, with a shrug. "But were you not the right one, Claudine, to buy in the silver for your grandmother's sake? If I am not mistaken, she left you some thousands of thalers for that special purpose."

"Yes, 'some provision for a rainy day,' as the will said. My practical grandmother would have been the first to blame me if I had spent it upon silver, with no bread in the cupboard."

"No bread! You, Claudine? you, the proud, spoiled lady-in-waiting!"

"Was I ever proud?" She shook her head with a charming smile. "And spoiled? Well, yes, that may be. One does not learn to work at court."

"You never knew how to do it before, Claudine," the lady blurted out,—"*that is—*" She tried to find words in which to explain, but failed.

"Go on; you are right," said Claudine, with composure. "The kind of work to which you allude is not learned at school either. But I am going to begin now; I am going to keep house in my old Owl's Nest——"

"You do not mean——"

"That I am going to stay with Joachim? I certainly do. Is he not in more need than ever of affection and sisterly devotion?" She clung closer to her brother's arm and looked lovingly up at him.

The lady's rather pale face flushed crimson, and, hastily stooping, she would have patted little Elizabeth's cheek, but the child avoided her touch and looked at her askance with distrust. "Go away!" she said, crossly.

Herr von Gerold looked displeased.

"Oh, let the little thing alone! I am used to having children dislike me," the lady said, with a hard, embarrassed laugh, holding her hand protectingly over the little blond head. "All I meant to say was"—she turned again to Claudine—"that you will have hard work at first; one need only look at your hands to see that. And then your elegance! You'll spoil dresses enough before you learn to put on a linen apron and cook a decent dinner,—that is——" Again she tried to correct herself, as she glanced hurriedly at the downcast eyes of the beautiful girl. "Beg pardon, child, I mean no harm; I only wanted to offer you one of my maids for a while. My servants are well trained——"

"Every one knows that. Your fame as a housekeeper has spread far beyond the boundaries of Geroldscourt," Herr von Gerold interposed, not without sarcasm. "But we must decline your offer with thanks. You will easily understand that we can keep no servants. However my sister may perform her difficult task, I shall be content and inexpressibly grateful. She will always be my guardian angel, even although she does not cook me a 'decent dinner' at first."

With graceful courtesy he lifted his hat and passed down the staircase, while the lady silently followed

the party; her own carriage was waiting before the door.

Meanwhile, old Friedrich, the former coachman, had taken down the trunk, and now passed his master with the basket of toys on his arm. The little girl listened anxiously to the clatter of the porcelain dishes as the old man walked by, and stood on tiptoe to peep at her possessions, among which one venturesome doll was very near toppling over the side of the basket. Fräulein Beata put out her hand hastily over the child's head to catch the offender.

"Don't touch my Lena with your great big hands!" the child screamed, clutching the lady's skirts.

"Ah, poor little thing! are you disciplining it already?" Fräulein Beata said, with a laugh, when Claudine, startled, put her hand over the little girl's mouth. "Why should she not tell the truth? My hands are large, and all the fine speeches in the world will not make them smaller. And one can see at a glance how clumsy they must be at all delicate work. The child protests against them as our schoolmates used to do,—you remember it well, Claudine. I am not an attractive person to my fellow-beings."

With an awkward inclination she passed down the last stairs and stood in the door-way beckoning to her carriage. Her figure was fine and strongly built, but her movements were angular and ungraceful, and the tanned face beneath bands of hair smoothed back behind the ears did not soften the unloveliness of the impression she produced.

Herr von Gerold recoiled shyly as he stepped outside the door, and would fain have taken refuge in the darkest corner of the court-yard. Noise and confusion were odious to him, and here, in the open space before

the house, there was a throng and a hurrying to and fro as at some fair. On one hand the plush furniture of his former drawing-room was being piled upon a wagon; on another, women were dragging away feather beds; kitchen utensils were being packed clattering into barrels, while the prices paid for the various articles were passed from mouth to mouth, with an accompaniment of laughter or of grumbling as the buyer was satisfied or the reverse.

Fortunately, the hired carriage in which Claudine had arrived was near the door. The party entered it quickly. Friedrich put the basket of playthings on the front seat, closed the door with a sad, last glance, and away rolled the vehicle, past all the familiar possessions upon which the blue skies of spring looked down, past all the empty stables and stalls, past blooming flower-beds, and leaping fountains, and the velvet lawn of the orchard on which the white blossoms lay like snow. Then the bright line of the high-road lay between the meadows and fields of the estate until it was shaded by woods on either hand; thence a branch road led away into the sunshine, and along it rolled the glistening and elegant equipage in which Fräulein Beata von Gerold was driving home.

"Must she too cross your path to-day?" Herr von Gerold said to his sister, looking angrily after the retreating carriage.

"She did me no harm, Joachim. I know her well, and I do not dislike her as some people do," Claudine rejoined. She had taken little Elizabeth on her lap, and her face was so hidden in the child's thick, fair curls that she was spared the last sad look at all she left behind. "Beata is blunt to rudeness, and

apparently careless of the feelings of others, but it is the result of embarrassment——”

“Nonsense, child! She is *not* kind, this Beata of yours. She has no heart, and nothing of the spirit I so adore in woman. That ideal elevation of thought, that charming sensibility which emanated all unconsciously from my poor Dolores, and with which you beguile me again to-day, beggared though I be,—there is not an atom of it in that barbarous creature.”

The light parasol of the ‘barbarous creature’ emerged once more into the sunshine from the shrubbery on the side of the road, and then vanished behind the beech-trees on the outskirts of the strip of woodland that marked the boundary of the estate of Geroldscourt.

On the farther side of this strip, among the mountains, there was another manor-house, an unornamented modern structure, with walls painted a light color, and white, rolling blinds. There were no fountains playing there, and but few flowers, but in wealth of trees the estate was unrivalled. Gigantic old lindens wove a green net-work above court-yard and mansion,—the front of the house alone was unshaded,—and about the beautiful dove-cot in the centre of the spacious lawn the breath of spring and the golden sunlight played freely.

This estate was also a Geroldscourt, the inheritance of the lords of Gerold-Neuhaus. In ancient times the estates lying in the spacious Paulinenthal and the huge forests climbing thence up the mountain-sides had all been united under one rule. The Gerolds von Altenstein had held sway over the life and death of every creature that moved and breathed for miles around; over the peasant behind his plough, the game in the forests, the scaly tribes in river and lake.

Later, rather more than two hundred years since, a certain Benno von Gerold, returning victor from a bloody feud, had celebrated the birth of a second son, born to him in his old age, by dividing the estate of Altenstein between his last-born and his first-born; this was the origin of the Neuhaus line. For a long time it was the less wealthy and influential branch; but then various rich heiresses married into it, and single members of it distinguished themselves in battle. Their successors, trading upon their reputation, gradually rose to high offices in the state, and the family had finally attained the loftiest position by the union of the youngest and handsomest of its members with a Princess of the reigning house.

Fräulein Beata von Gerold certainly had a right to drive home complacently in her well-appointed equipage, for she was the only sister of this same 'youngest and handsomest' member, and, young as she was, she was in his absence the sole mistress and manager of the old estate. And she understood thoroughly how to rule and to manage, as had all her predecessors of her sex. To put her own shoulder to the wheel, to rise early, to have a sharp eye everywhere, even in the darkest nook of the house, to be as it were omnipresent, had been the rule of all who had reigned at Neuhaus. The villagers declared that it was not so very long since the ancient spinning-wheel with its worn treadle had whirred monotonously day after day during the winter at the window of the living-room, or since the strips of homespun linen had lain stretched across the sunny bleaching-ground in the summer. Such industry and a strict rule in dairy and storehouse had principally contributed to the wealth of the family; at least so the people in the

village asserted, and their assertion was not without foundation.

The Altensteins, whose last scions we have seen leaving their ancestral home in a hired conveyance, could also look back upon a long line of industrious, thrifty housewives, who had failed in no duty, but the estate lay lower than Neuhaus, and of late years an unhappy fate had repeatedly decreed that the entire Paulinenthal should be visited by terrific tempests. In an hour the low-lying lands had been deluged with freshets from the mountains and flooded by the swollen river, all hope of the harvest destroyed, and the land laid waste for years to come. Thus, in spite of industry and energy, the downward course had begun.

And these blows of destiny had fallen in the lifetime of a man who united in his person all the characteristic virtues of his race,—ability as a landed proprietor, the courage of a soldier, loyalty and devotion to his sovereign. Yes, Colonel von Gerold was a worthy representative of his ancient line. He had, however, wandered into one dark path which his predecessors had shunned,—the passion for play had possessed him. He had spent long nights at the gaming-table, and had sacrificed huge sums there. As tempests had ravaged his ancestral soil, so this vice had laid waste the old family strong-boxes, which for centuries had held safely locked within them glittering treasures, valuable deeds and documents. This ruinous career had been cut short by the bullet of a comrade, whom the colonel had challenged in consequence of a quarrel at the gaming-table; the feverish existence was suddenly extinguished,—‘just at the right time,’ people said, but they were mistaken,—there was little more to lose.

The brimming eyes of the lovely maid of honour

rested upon the face of her brother with its 'pale cast of thought' as he sat beside her. Gradually it was informed by an expression of serene content. Yes, this dreamer and star-gazer, as he called himself, had been summoned, to save all that could be saved, from Spain, where he was residing when the terrible catastrophe occurred. He, however, could do nothing, more especially as the young wife whom he brought with him, the delicate Andalusian, opened her beautiful eyes wide with dismay at the bare idea of undertaking to play the part of a German housewife. Consequently her husband had lived for her alone, and had exhausted his last sources of income to preserve for her the illusion of the wealth of the family, until finally the angel of deliverance had freed her from earthly pain, when he had resigned himself placidly to the ruin of his fortune.

Claudine heard him breathe a long sigh of relief. She followed the direction of his gaze. Ah, yes, there above the forest rose the dark gray shaft of the tower. There lay the Owl's Nest, the protecting roof that was to shelter them. How they had smiled at court when Claudine had expended all her savings in repairing and keeping in order her grandmother's legacy to her! And now it returned her a blessing.

She could retire here to the green and peaceful shade of its trees from the heated atmosphere of the court. Yes, here she was at home. Home! what a soothing influence the word exerted after all the distress and agitation of the last few months! And he who sat beside her need not live in a hired dwelling; he would still be upon Gerold soil, even though it were only a woodland nook on the extreme border of the former estate. Here had been the site, in days long

gone by, of the convent Walpurgiszella, close upon the dividing line between the two Geroldscourts. The convent had been built by a pious and sorely-tried ancestress of the family, and had been partly destroyed in the Peasant War. The land with which the Gerolds had endowed the founder had then reverted to them, and the smaller portion, with the ruined structure, had fallen to the share of the Neuhaus branch. They had cared very little for it, allowing the ruins to fall still further to decay, and time and tempest had been left to wear and crumble it as they might. One wing only, where the nuns' parlour had formerly been, was kept in tolerable preservation to accommodate a forester. The entire place had been somewhat of a burden to its possessors, and they were quite willing at a later period to make it over to an Altenstein, the grandfather of these last Gerold-Altensteins, in exchange for a bit of meadowland. 'A ridiculously romantic whim,' had been their verdict when the Altenstein in question told them that his wife had taken a fancy to the picturesque spot. He had made it over to this dearly-loved wife, and thus the Owl's Nest had become the property of Claudine's grandmother.

The lofty southern portal of the former convent chapel soon came in sight. The huge round of the window in the blackened wall was filled in with a broken rosette, the delicate stone tracery showing almost like a cobweb against the vivid spring green of the trees behind it. Yes, old Frau von Gerold had formerly expended all her savings in preserving this picturesque corner of the earth from further decay. Not a stone had fallen away from the ruined church for years, and the remaining wing had been converted into a habitable refuge,—the dower-house of the old

Frau. There she had dwelt after her husband's death, and had filled with the loveliest flowers the mossy precincts of the ancient convent,—the Walpurgis churchyard, as the peasants called it.

Old Heinemann, for years chief gardener at Geroldscourt, had been her factotum. With indefatigable pains he had cultivated the waste piece of ground; and no well-trained child could have delighted him more than did this grateful bit of soil. The old man had accompanied his mistress when she withdrew to the Owl's Nest, and he still occupied his room in the basement as a kind of castellan, according to the directions of the old lady's will. He watched over every stone in the walls that threatened to crumble,—over every weed that sprang up in forest or meadow. "He counts the blades of grass,—he is a Cerberus," said Fräulein Lindenmeyer, the former lady's-maid of the old Frau. For her, too, an asylum had been secured for her lifetime in the Owl's Nest by her mistress. She occupied the best room on the ground-floor, the pleasant corner-room, where she sat day after day with her knitting and a novel from the circulating library, and where she could overlook the road at no great distance.

These two old people lived together very harmoniously. They prepared their meals at the same hearth, and never quarrelled, although Fräulein Lindenmeyer might sometimes feel some secret indignation as she removed her chocolate-pot and soup-kettle from too close proximity to the gardener's mess of sauerkraut or leeks.

Claudine had apprised the old people of her own and her brother's arrival, and she now observed with satisfaction a thin column of smoke rising and floating away above the trees. Fräulein Linden-

meyer was certainly preparing a refreshing cup of coffee which would make the 'poor beggar' forget his last dreary meal of potato soup. From afar came the crowing of the cock, which, with his six hens, resided in a corner of the ruined cloisters, and above the curling smoke from the chimney circled Heinemann's white doves, glittering against the blue sky like silver spangles.

The road now made a gradual turn to the right, which brought slowly into view the island of garden and meadow, with its green-wreathed ruins in the midst of the woodland shades. There lay the small house, built of stone, that had formerly withstood the torch and axe of the rebellious peasantry, its rough and blackened walls veined with a net-work of fresh mortar. It certainly was no knightly mansion, and the gray coats of the owls that housed in the ruins of the chapel were much more in harmony with it than silken court trains would have been. No matter! It was a home-like nest for unpretentious mortals; it lay embedded in luxuriant greenery, and its new windows, with their spotless curtains, looked out from its ancient physiognomy like clear, youthful eyes.

"Just at the right time of the year, Fräulein," said Heinemann, opening the carriage door. "The beds are still filled with narcissuses and tulips, and the cottage roses are just bursting open, while the children are running about the woods with their hands full of May-flowers."

He had been awaiting the arrival of the carriage in the road, the broad noonday sun shining full upon his bare head and thick gray hair as he helped them all to alight.

"Ah, it smells good here, little Fräulein, does it

not?" he said, as he lifted Elizabeth out of the vehicle and held her for a minute in his arms. The child was inhaling the delicious air with evident delight. "Everything fragrant, everything in bloom, whichever way you look, child. Yes, the dear God is very good to old Heinemann!"

He was right. The air was filled with sweet odours from the beds of narcissus and from the innumerable blossoms of the Persian lilac.

"And now shall we not go to Fräulein Lindenmeyer?" he asked the child, his eyes twinkling and a broad grin on his honest face. "She is waiting for us, with beautiful ribbons on her head, and she's been baking cakes all the morning. There's not a whole egg left in the house."

With a smile Claudine walked past him to the gate in the picket-fence, where there appeared between two vines flanking the entrance the old-fashioned cap with pomegranate ribbons upon Fräulein Lindenmeyer's gray puffs of hair.

The good old creature generally had some quotation from Schiller or Goethe ready for such occasions, but to-day her lips trembled with suppressed emotion. Had not that noble, handsome man, her pride, the former lord of the finest estate in all the country round, come to take refuge in the Owl's Nest?

But with great composure he took the hand which was about to put a cambric handkerchief to her eyes and clasped it warmly between his own. "I wonder if Fräulein Lindenmeyer still understands me as well, and can defend me as truly, as formerly, when some favour was to be obtained from my grandmother for the shy boy?" he said gently, stooping to look into her face.

Her eyes beamed. "Ah, be sure of it," was the

instant response. "The bell-room is all ready for you; it is heavenly up there,—a genuine poet's retreat. You will appreciate it."

He smiled and pressed her hand as his delighted gaze wandered across the garden. Opposite the southern portal of the ruined church, and on a line with the present dwelling-house, although at some small distance from it, stood the bell-tower of the convent church. Fire, tempest, and the blasts of winter had gradually reduced the structure, which had formerly soared high in air with a lofty, pointed spire, to a low round tower, all having fallen to decay above the bell-room, where the mason's hand had arrested it. The old Frau had connected the tower and dwelling-house by a narrow building, the lower part of which was used in winter as a conservatory, while the upper part constituted a kind of gallery, guarded on either side by a balustrade, and leading to the rooms of the dwelling-house, as well as to the lower ones in the tower, through glass doors. High above shone the windows of the bell-room, which still preserved its name.

Whilst Heinemann was taking basket and trunk from the carriage, the others walked towards the house. For a moment Claudine stood alone before the house door. She turned aside, as if to inhale the fragrance of a spray of syringa that drooped above her shoulder, but her thoughts were far away. Across this threshold, three years before, she had passed into a world filled with brilliancy and amusement. By her grandmother's desire and request she had been given the post of lady-in-waiting to the Dowager Duchess. It had not been easy for her to resign her much-coveted position; far from it. Her eyes were dim and her lip quivered. She had been her noble mistress's acknowledged favour-

ite, and her Highness had sheltered her from every shaft of envy and malice, so that she had known scarce any save the brilliant side of court life. Now all that lay behind her forever, and her heart was already filled with longing for her kind and gracious old mistress. The new life which she had prescribed for herself was by no means an easy one. Inexperienced, ignorant as to the needs and requirements of life, she had ventured to undertake to be a faithful mother to the child of her brother, and to relieve him of all care and anxiety, husbanding every penny, that want might be kept from the door of the Owl's Nest. And yet, was not this her bounden duty, as her departure from court had also been her bounden duty?

She pressed her hand to her throbbing heart, and, slowly crossing the threshold, went up the staircase,—narrow, indeed, but scoured to a snowy whiteness. As she entered the room which had been her grandmother's little drawing-room she drew a long breath, and said to herself that it would be sinful weakness to allow her courage to fail *here*,—here where everything reminded her of the contented life of a gentle, though strong, feminine nature, where the dear old portraits of good people greeted her kindly from the walls. At court, to be sure, the walls of her room had been hung with lofty mirrors and rich stuffs, her foot had trodden upon costly rugs, and a richly-carved canopied bedstead with silken curtains, in the adjoining apartment, had been her resting-place at night. But the same Venetian glasses had reflected the figure of her predecessor, the same canopy had guarded her slumbers, and in a few days a successor would occupy the same apartments; she had but borrowed them. Where she now stood taking off her hat and mantle

to stay was her own, her home, with its old-fashioned convenient furniture, its antique bookcase, and its odd corner-cupboards containing her grandmother's porcelain and china. Little Elizabeth ran towards her in high glee with a piece of cake; her grandmother's copper tea-kettle was smoking on the sofa-table, the door leading to the platform of the connecting structure stood wide open to admit the fragrant breeze from the garden, and at the other end of the short gallery one could see through the glass door into the lower room of the tower,—the room which had been her own during her girlish vacations, which she had always passed with her grandmother. More even than by beholding these dear old places was she encouraged and cheered by the sight of her brother. His step was as elastic as if he had been relieved from an almost intolerable burden; and afterwards, when she went up with him to the bell-room and arranged his manuscript and papers on a table by the window, he said, "It is a trite image, but I can find none better: I feel at this moment like a man who, after being wrecked on stormy seas, treads once more his native soil, and longs to fall down and kiss it gratefully."

Two weeks had passed since then, weeks filled with work and exertion which had brought their reward. Yes, it was a success, even although the coarse apron donned for household purposes now and then showed scorched spots, and although the hands of the newly-made cook were very sensitive to rough usage. Fräulein Lindenmeyer's assistance was from the first declined. She was frail and old, and often needed care

and nursing. Heinemann, on the other hand, was of inestimable service; he performed all the ruder tasks required in the housekeeping.

To-day for the first time Claudine found time to mount to the roof of the tower. The morning sun lay brightly upon its hoary head, the brazen tongue of which—the bell that had once sounded its summons over forest and hill—had long before been hurled into the depths below by infuriated peasants. The topmost walls were flecked with yellow stone-crop struggling forth to the light from every rift and chink, and for all its aged dignity the old pile gladly harboured and sheltered the tiny feathered folk, that built and bred and piped and twittered beneath its window-sills and ledges. And up from the garden, and from the greenery that draped the ruins of the chapel, came the dreamy hum of ‘innumerable bees’ and of the wild horde of wasps, insatiate in their thirst for the sweets that May offers in her chalices.

Over it all arched the blue sky, only now and then traversed by a bird in its swift flight, clear as crystal, as far above the earth, with its blooming growth and mouldering decay, as are the thoughts of the Most High above human dreaming and striving; but on the distant horizon it met the swelling mountain-range and melted into it. There the Paulinenthal broadened to a plain, to be cut off by those far-off heights. A delicate golden mist veiled the level landscape and obscured the ducal castle. Nothing was to be seen of its lofty structure, its flag-decked towers, its broad terrace steps, at the foot of which the swans circled, furrowing the placid silver of the little lake; nothing of the thicket of magnolias and orange-trees in the wondrous conservatories, where the atmosphere, heavy with fra-

grance, brought the blood throbbing to the temples and made the heart beat with a sense of oppression; nothing of the lofty windows, behind which a young wife, the daughter of a king, slender and very pale, walked feebly hither and thither, coughing from time to time, and longing for a glance from the dark eyes whose looks of imploring passion were given—to another.

Claudine hastily retreated from the parapet, pale to the lips. Was it for this that she had ascended hither under the cool blue, to be assailed by such memories of all from which she had fled? Yes, heaven and earth met and mingled in the human heart, as they did there on the distant horizon.

She turned away from the sunlit expanse and looked northward. Woods, nothing but green woods, in that direction, except where the broad road cleft the foliage. There in distant perspective like a little framed picture could be seen the Neuhaus mansion, its many-windowed façade standing out among its circle of lindens. There a strong and rough but pure breeze was blowing under Beata's rule. For some time there had been a coolness between the two branches of the family. The Neuhausers had publicly condemned the colonel's 'godless devotion to the gaming-table,' and there was an end of all pleasant intercourse between the families, which had formerly intermarried several times. Lothar and Joachim, the present representatives of the two, and about the same age, had studiously avoided each other, although Claudine and Beata, who were pupils of one and the same *pension*, were far more friendly.

Thus no one had been surprised when the two Gerolds who suddenly appeared at court had held coldly aloof from each other,—Lothar, the elegant, satirical officer, and Claudine, the new lady-in-waiting.

Lothar was a distinguished figure, imperious in demeanour, conscious of having attained the goal of his ambition, flattered and caressed by the court circle, and he had seemed quite to overawe and embarrass Claudine. It was just before his marriage with the Princess Katharina, the cousin of the reigning Duke, and the girl had not taken it amiss that from his dizzy height he had ignored the daughter of the impoverished branch of his family, which had wellnigh extinguished the splendour of the ancient name, whilst he could now add to it the title of Baron, lately conferred upon him by the Duke. She had been a shadow on the pathway of this brilliant star in the firmament of the court, and this thought had sufficed to cause her to shrink from all possible contact with one so lofty in position.

How ineffably plain and simple did his paternal mansion show in the landscape at this minute in the light of the event which had crowned his ambitious hopes, his marriage! She could see him now in her mind's eye as he had stood beside the Princess on the steps of the altar, surrounded by all the glittering pomp and splendour of the court. The insignificant figure of the bride, buried, as it were, in satin and lace, had nestled close to his lofty form, as if she feared even then that he whom she had shown such determination to wed might be snatched from her, and her black bead-like eyes had gazed up at him fixedly in passionate devotion. And he? He had been deadly pale, and his 'yes' had been harshly, almost angrily, uttered. Had he been seized with a vertigo on the summit of his fortune, or had he suddenly been assailed by a foreboding that he should not long enjoy it, that the loving black eyes would close forever a year afterwards beneath the pines and palms of the Riviera, whither their travelling-carriage

had borne the pair immediately after the marriage ceremony? Yes, the Princess had died there in their lovely villa after giving birth to a daughter, and there the bereaved husband was still living, to give the child, a frail little creature, the benefit, it was said, of the warmer climate, but it might well be from a reluctance to quit the scene of his short-lived happiness. He had not seen his native place since, and it could hardly be, if he did return, that he would occupy the quiet lonely house yonder, which was surely best for the hermits of the Owl's Nest and for the soothing serenity of the woodland oasis.

Claudine leaned smiling over the balustrade of the tower and looked down into the garden that lay beneath her like a bright chess-board with its brilliant flower- and vegetable-beds. "Lullaby, lullaby," sang little Elizabeth, as she trudged along the principal path with her favourite nursling wrapped in a pink cloak in her arms. Heinemann had stuck a bunch of May-flowers in her straw hat, and Fräulein Lindenmeyer was watching the happy little creature from the arbour, where she was tying asparagus into bunches for Heinemann. The old gardener sold surplus vegetables and flowers in the neighbouring little town; the proceeds of such sales were his own by the will of his deceased mistress.

He was just coming from the ruins with an armful of chips, and through the open glass door was heard the deep bell of the tall clock in the dwelling-room striking eleven,—time to go to the kitchen.

"Labour is no disgrace," Heinemann remarked soon afterwards in the kitchen, with a side-glance at the iron pan which Claudine had placed on the hearth,—“no, none at all; and a couple of black spots do not deface

delicate fingers any more than does the black earth my white narcissuses when they come up out of it. But to come directly from a court to a kitchen,—why, 'tis just as if my beautiful gloxinias should come up in the chicken-yard, poor things! It just chokes me to look on and see it. If it had to be;— but there is no absolute need of it that I know. 'Tis all very well to save,—I don't throw away my pennies; God forbid!— but there's reason in all things, Fräulein Claudine." He looked significantly at the very tiny piece of butter which had just been put into the pan in which a couple of pigeons were to be cooked. "That's not enough for a barefooted friar!" He shook his head. "No need for us to shave as close as that, not as close as that. We are richer than you think, Fräulein Claudine."

He spoke the last words very slowly, and with such significant emphasis that the young lady looked up at him in surprise. "Have you discovered a treasure, Heinemann?" she asked, smiling.

"That's as one chooses to look at it," he said, wagging his head, while countless little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes expressed much secret satisfaction. "'Tis neither silver nor gold. God knows a fellow might search himself blind among the old ruins and never pick up a farthing's worth. No, no; it all stuck to the fingers of those murdering thieves long ago. Why, they even tore off the gold spangles from the petticoat of the infant Jesus! But there are other things of value besides church vessels and ornaments. You see, the convent once owned a deal of land. Many a young girl joined the order, bringing wealth in land with her, and it was all turned to profit,—let out for farms,—and there were tithes of grain and poultry and honey and

God knows what besides, and the convent farms were well managed. The old pile here flowed with milk and honey, like the land of Canaan, and the nuns knew how to turn what came to them into shining coin. Many a freight-wagon left the convent gates laden with casks and chests to be sold out in the world. Ah! the nuns knew what they were about right well, right well. And everywhere on the meadows there were heath-berries and blackberries and strawberries, all good for bees, which were more plentiful here than on the great bee-farms in Hungary in our time. Yes, indeed; and yesterday evening I was down in the cellar, where I had long since noticed there were a couple of loose stones that needed some mortar. What with the clearing out and cleaning of the upper rooms, I had put off attending to it; but last evening I thought I ought to be ashamed of my neglect, and I got my mortar-bucket and trowel and went down. I took hold of the loose stone, and it suddenly came out in my hands, and, good gracious! before I knew what was going to happen, more stones rattled out, until there was a hole there big enough for a man to get into, and when I looked in, what did I see? Why, wax!"

He paused for a moment, as if to revel in the remembrance. "Yes, wax; beautiful, pure, yellow wax," he repeated, emphasizing every word. "Plate upon plate, a whole, dry cellar-full, just under the tower!" He shook his head. "'Tis a marvel! Old fellow as I am, I love a fairy-tale, and I felt as if I were in the middle of one; for what fills that cellar is the same as a chest-full of gold. The nuns must have been storing it up for years—years! There's a many hundred-weight; and they knew its value well enough, or they would never have walled it up so tight before they ran off.

And I know it too, for I've kept bees myself, and have sold what they brought me."

Involuntarily Claudine had paused in her occupation, and had followed the man's story with eager interest as his honest old face brightened with delight and pride in his discovery. "Yes, yes; there's a couple of thousand thalers' worth there at least," he said, with a long breath and a merry twinkle of his eyes. "Hm! a tidy little dowry which the nun's ghosts, that walk still, they say, have stored up specially for our Fräulein."

Claudine laughed. "I don't think we ought to appropriate your discovery, Heinemann," she said, shaking her head. "The former owners here have the same rights as ourselves."

The old gardener's look turned suddenly to one of surprise and dismay. "They surely will not——?" he stammered. "Why, it would be a sin and a shame! That Neuhauser, with all his wealth and princely luck into the bargain, would sooner cut off his hand than snatch at such a petty morsel! To be sure,"—he shrugged his shoulders,—"no one can tell. So many fine gentlemen nowadays want all that they can get, and it may be that the Herr Baron will hold out his hand and not say 'no' when it comes to the point. Mercy on us! I no more dreamed of the Neuhausers putting a spoke in our wheel than I did of the skies falling. Well, well, we must wait and see if some one does not scrape the very butter off our bread." He sighed and went towards the door. "But you must come and see it all, Fräulein Claudine. I'll go down and clear out a couple of stones that are in the way, and see that everything overhead is in order, so that there may be no accident, and after that I've done with it."

Soon afterwards Claudine and her brother accompanied the old man to the cellar.

It was a fine, dry, cool room which the lantern in Heinemann's hand revealed to them. Yes, these walls dated from the time when the noble might build as he chose, without making any considerable hole in his purse,—when the peasants were serfs, whose labour transported hither the huge, smooth stones and cemented them so thoroughly that no dampness could penetrate the thick walls. It was no wonder that the waxen treasure of the nuns still lay here just as it had been piled by the hands so long since fallen to dust. There it was, disk heaped on disk; the outsides brown with age, it is true, but where freshly broken showing as bright and yellow as if just from the melting-pot.

"Just as good as coined gold," said Heinemann, swinging his lantern around so as to show the piles of wax on every side. "And all that collected by the little fellows in yellow breeches."

"And the cups, the blossoms where they gathered it, bloomed centuries ago," Herr von Gerold said with some emotion. "If I had the disposal of the treasure, not a finger should be allowed to touch it."

"Lord preserve us!" the old gardener ejaculated in dismay.

"Even although no inscriptions can be found upon the surfaces of the disks such as have been deciphered on the wax tablets of the ancients," Herr von Gerold went on, regardless of the interruption, "they are vivid mementos of the secluded existence of the cloister. What was the inner life of the nuns, while their busy fingers transformed to the shape we see here what the humming, 'heavy-winged thieves' had brought to them

from the blooming, lovely, wicked world outside the convent walls! What were their thoughts——”

“Allow me, Herr von Gerold,—I can tell you exactly. They thought of the glittering coin the wax would bring them, and nothing else,” Heinemann interposed respectfully, but with such a twinkle in his eyes that Herr von Gerold could not help laughing. “The nuns and monks were always fond of hoarding. I’ve read all about it, and of how the pious ladies in the convent could wheedle the last savings and the tiniest spot of ground out of those who were so frightened at the idea of leaving the world, that they were ready to sign away everything in payment for prayers for their salvation. It was just the same then as it is now,—man grasps whatever he can get; he is but a poor creature of earth, and has never yet been born with wings. Only there’s no need to pull such a holy face and pretend that it’s all for the glory of God and His righteousness.”

He let the light of his lantern play upon the walls of the chamber. “What a beautiful cellar it is! Not a trace of the fire that destroyed so much is to be seen here. We shall make good use of this room, Fräulein Claudine. All the other underground rooms are useless, except that miserable hole,”—pointing towards the small cellar beneath the dwelling-house,—“where there is hardly room for a few potatoes. And so we’ll get all this stuff out into the air as soon as possible.”

“That must not be, my dear Heinemann,” Claudine said, decidedly. “This must all remain just as it is, untouched, until it has been inspected by some one of the Neuhausers.—Will you not write to Lothar?” she said, turning to her brother.

“I?” Herr von Gerold exclaimed, with an air of

comic dismay. "Dear heart, anything that you desire—save only that! You know——"

"Yes, I know," she said, smiling. "Nor do I wish to have anything to do with the Herr Baron. I will confide the matter to Beata. She can either come herself, or send some suitable person."

Herr von Gerold nodded. "It can do no harm to inform them at Neuhaus of the discovery. The world is censorious, and, hearing of what has been found, would probably exaggerate and be ready to accuse the finders of concealment. No shadow of the kind must fall upon my little sister. Lothar will think just as I do. The nuns' wax has been unowned property for so long that it now belongs to whoever owns the place where it was found. *Nota bene*, according to Roman and common law only half, however, for the other half goes to the finder, in this case our Heine-mann."

The old gardener started in positive terror. "To me? The half of what is found on Gerold soil mine? That would be a fine affair! What had I to do with the old stones tumbling out of the wall? Was it any merit of mine? And what do I want with the stuff?" He shook his head energetically. "I have enough, and more than enough, to keep me while I live. I have no care for the future, thanks to my dear old mistress. No, don't mention anything of the kind to me, Herr von Gerold. Not a crumb will I take,—not even so much as would wax an end of thread! But I suppose things ought to be managed rightly, so let some one come over from Neuhaus and stick his nose in here, that there may be no stupid gossip hereafter."

The next afternoon Claudine walked through the forest to the Neuhaus Geroldscourt. She wanted to speak to Beata herself. She went by a narrow foot-path which, winding through the woods, at last led into the broad road, leading from the highway, near the Altenstein Geroldscourt.

It was a tolerably long distance which she had to walk, but the path was carpeted with moss as soft as velvet, and above her arched the luxuriant interlacing boughs of gigantic trees. She herself, the lovely swan of the Gerolds, as her brother had tenderly called her, flitted, in her light summer dress and straw hat, like a ray of light through the delicious green twilight that surrounded her until she reached the road, which gradually ascended the mountain-side through thinner forests, and then past fields of clover and young wheat, through a country rich in every agricultural blessing.

Involuntarily she stooped and gathered a handful of the buttercups that shone among the rich meadow-grass like little golden eyes. Before long the windows of Neuhaus were in sight. The castle, as it was called, was situated on a gentle eminence; a velvet lawn clothed the slope; the grass there was cultivated for beauty, not for utility.

Claudine approached by a narrow path leading directly through the lawn. Her eyes were bent upon the ground, and she did not look up until she reached the gravel sweep beneath the lindens on the western side; there she paused for a moment, disagreeably surprised, and for the moment uncertain whether to advance or not. There were visitors at Neuhaus.

A lady, who had apparently been walking to and fro beneath the lindens, approached her; she was

tall and stately, with a very fair complexion and dark eyes. Her rich gray silk train trailed on the gravel, and in the comb which fastened her thick braids of hair high on her head jewels were sparkling. She carried in her arms a child, a puny sallow little creature in a long dress, the lace trimming of which almost touched the ground.

Claudine gazed as if spell-bound at the child's face. She knew those large glittering beady eyes, the aquiline nose above the pouting lips, the low forehead above which the black hair bristled so thickly,—the resemblance was strong to the collateral branch of the reigning ducal family.

"Want them!" the child stammered, reaching out for the buttercups in Claudine's hand.

The young lady with a kindly smile would have put the flowers into the outstretched hand, but the person carrying the child retreated hastily, as if there might be infection in such contact. "Oh, no, if you please! I cannot allow that!" she insisted, with a contemptuous glance at Claudine's simple attire. There was something decidedly hostile in the woman's fiery eyes.

The child thus denied began to scream loudly, and at that moment a gentleman came around the corner of the house. "Why is the child screaming so frightfully?" he asked, approaching in evident irritation.

Claudine involuntarily assumed the coldly-reserved demeanor which had been her shield and breastplate at court. Baron Lothar had returned to Germany, and the wayward little girl was his child.

"Want them!" the little thing repeated in the midst of its screams, and pointed to the flowers.

Baron Lothar shook his finger at it gravely, and it stopped screaming. His bearded face flushed, and there

was irritation in his eyes at sight of the former lady-in-waiting, who stood before him coldly self-possessed. Nevertheless he bowed courteously.

"Little one," he said, with a sarcastic smile, to the child, as he wiped away the tears from the puny face, "who would have flowers plucked by another! You must learn that fair hands delight to withhold what is desired."

Claudine looked at him, idolized and spoiled by women as he had been, in incredulous surprise, but she was not at all embarrassed by his sharp speech. "The child shall not learn so hard a lesson from me," she said, gently. "And I really have no right to these flowers,—they grew in your meadow.—Will you now allow me——?" turning to the woman in charge of the little girl.

Baron Lothar turned also to the stately dame in angry surprise. "Now?" he repeated. "How so?"

"I was afraid that Leonie might put the flowers in her mouth," was the stammered reply. Vexation and confusion struggled for the mastery in the tone in which the words were spoken.

His lip curled with contempt. "And the wild-flowers, torn up ruthlessly and heaped beside the child's carriage and on the coverlet,—who gave her those, Frau von Berg?"

The lady was silent and turned away her head, while Claudine made haste to give the flowers to the child, for the scene was becoming embarrassing. The tiny hands forthwith began to pull the poor yellow blossoms to pieces. Involuntarily Claudine was reminded of the child's mother, the Princess Katharina, who, it was said, at the time of her incipient passion for the handsome Lothar, used to pull to pieces flower after flower

with a feverishly murmured "He loves me, loves me not," etc., thus destroying the loveliest roses, the rarest blossoms, in the hot-house.

Perhaps Baron Lothar's thoughts were similarly employed; he looked on with a frown at the work of destruction and shrugged his shoulders. "I must beg you to let the child lie down again," he said to Frau von Berg. "She has been sitting up too long, and is tired, as she shows by leaning forward."

The lady rustled away to get the child's carriage, while Claudine, with an inclination of her head, would have left the master of the house, but he walked beside her.

As they turned around the corner a light breeze awoke, stirring the leaves of the lindens above them to a low murmur.

"How mysteriously they whisper up there!" said Baron Lothar. "Do you know what the old trees whisper about? About the Montagues and Capulets of the Paulinenthal?"

The young lady smiled coldly. "At a girls' school there is seldom any thought of family feuds," she replied, with composure. "Girls like one another without asking if they may; and if I come to-day where my people have not been welcome, it is to see my school-mate. I spent part of my last school holidays at Neuhaus; the beautiful old trees know me."

He bowed silently and walked on, while she entered the hall. There was no need to ask after Beata; the clear, energetic voice of the 'school-mate' was distinctly audible behind a door leading into a room looking on the court-yard.

"Come, don't be silly, child!" it said. "I have no time to waste. Hold out your hand!" Then came a

moment's pause. "Only see how beautifully the cut is healing! We can draw out that stitch now." A low cry in a youthful voice followed, and then there was silence.

Claudine opened the door noiselessly. The atmosphere of the ironing-room greeted her senses. At a long table three women were standing ironing diligently, while Beata at a window was re-bandaging the injured hand of a young servant-maid.

She did not perceive her visitor, but her keen eyes strayed from the bandage she was adjusting to the ironing-board. "Louise, you dunce, what are you doing?" she exclaimed. "Good heavens, one of my best collars in your unskilful hands! What business has such a beginner as you to attempt to iron that?" She took the embroidered collar from the girl, sprinkled it with water, and rolled it up. "I will repair the mischief myself by and by," she said to the others, pointing to the tiny bundle. Then she turned towards the door and discovered Claudine. On the instant genuine, cordial delight quite transfigured her harsh features. "Have coffee made instantly!" she called back into the ironing-room, as she put her arm around the young lady's waist and led her into the sitting-room, the spacious beautiful corner apartment, with its dark antique mahogany furniture, its white-pine flooring, and its spotless white curtains. Just so the room had looked before either Lothar or Beata had been born, when the old spinning-wheel had hummed in the window-recess.

The shades of the three windows toward the south were pulled down, but the two windows that looked toward the east needed no screen from the broad afternoon sunshine. The lindens arched above them, and beneath their interlacing foliage there was a clear, unimpeded view of the blooming, sunlit landscape.

"Now make yourself comfortable, dear old school-mate," said Beata, leading her visitor to a seat at one of these windows. She took off her hat and passed her hand lightly over the beautiful and abundant hair, which, carelessly knotted at the back, had been somewhat loosened beneath the hat. "There it is, just as we all liked to see it,—those wavy curls on your forehead and neck! No false 'bangs' do you ever wear, and the court barber has had no chance to touch your head with his tongs. Ah, you have come tolerably whole and sound out of that—Babel!"

Claudine smiled and sat down at Beata's work-table. Beside some fine mending lay a beautifully bound copy of Scheffel's 'Ekkehard.'

"Yes, you see, dear," said Beata, half apologetically, noticing the book, as she busied herself with the arrangements for serving the coffee, "a woman like myself, who has to play *gendarme* to indolence and carelessness all day long, and to work very hard herself into the bargain, clings all the more tenaciously to her rare hours of refreshment, and so I gradually gather together in my small library all that is best in our modern literature."

So saying, she put both book and mending into her work-basket and covered the table with a napkin, then brought out the sugar-box, an old-fashioned lacquered tin case with a strong clasp. She opened it and made a wry face. "Yes, I thought so,—and no wonder, with all the hubbub,—they have put soft sugar into the box for the best. Did any one ever hear of such carelessness! Oh, Lothar played me such a trick! The fellow answered my letter telling him of the purchase of your silver, and informed me that he was coming back himself. I supposed that he would arrive at the earliest

in July, and was in no hurry, when suddenly, just as we were in the middle of our big wash, the day before yesterday, he came down upon us like an avalanche with bag and baggage. It was terrible; I needed all my presence of mind, for the housekeeper lost her head entirely and made mistake after mistake."

She lit the spirit-lamp under the coffee-urn and cut a piece of cake into slices, Claudine meanwhile reflecting upon how well she looked in her wide, snowy apron, her linen collar and cuffs, as 'on hospitable thoughts intent' she played the part of hostess. Her self-possession contrasted oddly enough with the awkward, almost offensive demeanour of the 'barbarous woman' who had been encountered on the staircase at Altenstein Geroldscourt.

"Lothar alone would have given us no trouble at all," she went on, after she had taken a bowl of early strawberries from the cupboard, "although he is spoiled enough; but the train of people whom he is obliged to drag about with him! There is Frau von Berg, her maid, and a child's nurse, with several men-servants; all must be provided for. And the child, the child! Such a poor little creature has never been seen before within the walls of Neuhaus,—no, never! Heavens! what would Ulrich Gerold, my sturdy grandfather of blessed memory, have said to it? 'Worthless brats' he used to call such bloodless little things. Positively, the child cannot stand on its little spindle-legs, and it is nearly two years old. Baths of wild thyme and fresh milk would do the poor little creature good, but none of us dare to interfere with Frau von Berg's complicated method of treatment; she is as infallible as the Pope. Lothar's mother-in-law, the old Princess Thekla, engaged her to take charge of her grand-daughter, and

seems to be fairly in love with the fat, disagreeable creature, who is utterly distasteful to me."

She shrugged her shoulders, poured the steaming coffee into the cups, and sat down, whereupon Claudine explained the purpose of her visit.

Beata stirred the coffee in her cup and listened in silence, but when it came to the discovery she looked up and laughed. "What! wax? And I was fancying that old Heinemann had found a chest-full of gold and silver church-vessels! Wax! Well, after all, Ben Akiva was wrong: this is new. And those nuns, who, the poets say, were mostly pure, white roses, pining, pale and emaciated, behind their barred windows for the joys of a worldly life——" She laughed again. "The Walpurgis nuns evidently had no time for that. They must have been positive elves of thrift and frugality. According to our old family chronicle, there were two Gerolds among the nuns when they were driven out. Who knows whether they were not the very ones who descended into the cellar with trowel and mortar to wall up the booty from the rapacious rebels? Who knows? I would have done it." She shook her head, smiling. "A strange story. And it is almost as strange that I should have sitting before me here the honest creature who in all seriousness proposes to divide the treasure with us disk by disk!" A gleam of merriment lit up her strong features. "Yes, there is always a use for wax, if only to polish up a table, or to make one's thread smoother and stronger for sewing. But I am not the one to be consulted, dear heart; you must discuss it with Lothar."

And she rose and left the room.

Claudine made no attempt to detain her. Although she had no desire for further intercourse with the

'Herr Baron at Neuhaus,' she was aware that only thus could the matter be finally arranged, and she quietly rose as, after waiting awhile, she heard his steps outside in the hall.

He entered with his sister. At court Claudine had never seen him except in his captain's uniform, brilliant and victorious 'as the god of war,' the young court-beauties had declared in whispers. To-day he was dressed in a plain suit of gray, and she could not but admit, as she had done to herself before beneath the lindens, that the glittering uniform had borne but a small part in rendering him the most distinguished figure at court, even beside the dignified and chivalric Duke.

She left the window, and would have spoken, but he raised his hand, smiling, and said, quickly, "No need of another word; Beata has told me that your romantic Owl's Nest has given up its treasures,—the ancient wealth of a convent! How interesting! Be sure it was the ghostly hands of the nuns themselves that loosened the stones in the wall because the true owner had come at last."

Claudine looked surprised at the bearded lips which uttered such pleasant words. Was this the man who, at the side of the Princess, had never had a kindly word for his kinswoman, and whose dark glance had now and then followed the new lady-in-waiting with ill-concealed annoyance?

Beata, without further ado, forced her back to the coffee-table. "Come, do not put on such a solemn air, Claudine. We are not at court. Sit down. Your Cinderella feet—'the pride of the school'—do you remember?—must have been surprised to find themselves expected to take such a walk."

With a blush the young lady hastily resumed her seat at the table, and Beata sat down beside her, while Baron Lothar stood opposite, leaning upon the back of a chair.

"It certainly is a long walk through the depths of the forest," he said, in assent to his sister's remark,—
"a walk which no lady should venture to take alone. Are you not afraid of encountering some rudeness?"

"I have no fear. I used to be as much at home in the forest as in our nursery. I feel rather that it protects me like an old friend."

"Yes, I am just such another tramp through thick and thin and night and mist!" Beata said, laughing. "We are children of the Thuringian forest. But the walk was really too rough a one for your delicate feet, Claudine——"

"And an utterly unnecessary sacrifice to your overstrained sense of justice," her brother interposed; "for even without the exercise of the wisdom of Solomon we cannot but decide instantly that we have not the faintest claim to a share in the discovered hoard. The Owl's Nest has been for many years in the possession of the Altenstein branch. How could we go far back in time to establish such a claim, when if we thus investigate the past we must atone for an injustice? I never have been able to comprehend how my grandfather could consent to receive a very valuable piece of cultivated ground in exchange for that worthless heap of ruins."

"My opinion exactly," Beata observed, with an energetic nod. "No, let your old Heinemann put his estimate of his discovery to the proof. An annual addition to your housekeeping fund will not be unwelcome to you——"

"Practical as ever, my dear Beata," said Baron Lothar; "but I am half inclined to protest against such a use for the nuns' legacy. Would it not be more poetic if the spoils gathered by bees in ancient times from the flowers were converted into precious stones?—into a diamond necklace, perhaps, which the heiress might wear at her first reappearance at court?" he added, carelessly, with a glance at the former lady-in-waiting.

She raised her eyes; her glance met his. "Stones for bread?" she asked. "The delight of being able to banish care from my home is far more precious to me, and therefore I am 'practical' like Beata. And what should I do at court? You seem not to know that I have resigned my place——"

"Oh, the very birds on the house-tops in the capital chatter about that. But do not your name and your coveted position as prime favourite of the Dowager Duchess give you the right to go to court——?"

"From the lowly Owl's Nest?" she interrupted him, with quivering lips and eyes which had a suspicion of moisture about them.

"The distance is certainly too great," he admitted; but his voice sounded harsh and stern, as if he had a victim in his power whom he was resolved not to release. "Eight hours of driving by the road! Well, perhaps the court will find some means of shortening the distance. It may move nearer to you——"

"How could that be?" exclaimed Claudine, startled. "Except the old hunting-lodge, 'Woodburn,' the ducal family owns nothing habitable in our vicinity."

"And the moisture is absolutely dripping from the walls in that famous Woodburn, with its three rooms," Beata said, with a laugh. "The wind will blow away the whole structure one of these days."

Baron Lothar was silent for a few moments. He began to pace the room to and fro. "I spent a few hours in the capital, to let the Princess Thekla see her grandchild, the day before yesterday, on my way hither," he began again, "and there I heard casually of some such intention on the part of the Duke." As he uttered the last word he suddenly fixed his eyes with an inquiring, half-hostile expression upon Claudine's face, which flushed crimson. "There were all sorts of explanations and surmises," he went on, averting his eyes from the flushed face, and smiling contemptuously. "You know what court gossip is. It flits like moths out of every corner, and can neither be caught nor arrested, but its traces are to be seen in some defaced reputation or other."

Claudine raised her head at these words. "Yes, I know what court gossip is, but I have never condescended so far as to allow it to exercise any influence upon my actions or opinions."

"Brava, old school-mate!" exclaimed Beata. "You certainly have come back untainted from that atmosphere." Her clear eyes had sharply scanned the agitated face of each speaker. "But let us drop these court reminiscences," she added, frowning. "I detest gossip, whether of the wash-tub or of the court; both are alike vulgar. Rather tell me, Claudine, how you are succeeding in your new life."

"It certainly was hard at first," the young lady replied, with her gentle smile in which there was apt to be a tinge of melancholy. "My hands and my gown bore traces of my awkwardness in the kitchen. But that first stage is fortunately past, and I now can find time to take pleasure in our quiet life and in Joachim's cheerful face."

"Indeed! He looks on cheerfully at your performance of—a servant's duties?" The Baron's eyes spoke contempt.

"Do you suppose that I do not take care that he shall see no such performance on my part?" she rejoined, gayly, seeming to ignore his sarcasm. "There needs no special art to do so, I assure you. Joachim is busy from morning until night over his work upon Spain, into which he is weaving all his most beautiful poems. And in his delight in such labour he is utterly unconscious of the world of reality, with its petty cares and anxieties. He is one who sleeps just as well upon hard boards as upon a soft bed, and who is perfectly content to live upon milk and brown bread. What his nature needs is affection, intelligent sympathy, and these he always finds when he comes down to us from his bell-room. Yes, I am sure I comprehend the task set for me. Joachim is a genuine poet confided to my care by no less a person than the Muse herself." She rose and took up her hat and gloves. "And now I must go home and make an omelette for supper. Don't laugh, Beata,"—she joined heartily for a moment in her school-mate's merriment,—“my good Lindenmeyer is very proud of the skill of her pupil in turning an omelette.”

"Your old Princess ought to see it."

"It would please her, I know. She is a German woman; the housewifely element is in her blood, born in the purple though she be."

"Do you suppose it would please her if she were suddenly compelled to exchange her audience-chamber for the kitchen fire? The contrasts of light and shade which you have experienced are too harsh. My heart is sore to-day."

"No, indeed, Beata," her brother interrupted her, with evident irony. "This time of trial will not last long. It is only a transition-period. Before you are aware of it a sunny splendour will envelop the shaded flower,—a burst of sunshine for which all the roses of Shiraz would envy it."

The brother and sister had, unperceived by Claudine, exchanged a look of intelligence, and as he uttered the last words Baron Lothar bowed and hastily left the room.

"He talks nonsense," said Beata, shrugging her shoulders, as she went to the door leading into the next room. "Wait a moment, Claudine, while I get ready for a walk; I should like to go part of the way with you."

Claudine again walked to the window. Her cheeks burned, and there was a frown on her brow. How great must be the malice of those in the ducal castle who could malign her after she had courageously taken a step prescribed by her self-respect! And how had she so offended and irritated the man who had just left the room, that he had dared to outrage and embitter her but lately soothed consciousness by offensive remarks uttered apparently in jest?

Outside and tolerably near the window stood the child's carriage in which his little girl was lying. Was he wreaking upon others his disappointment in the loss of the high-born wife who had lent such material splendour to his existence? He might well bewail his fate. She had been snatched from him forever, and all that was left of her lay there frail and feeble, while

the wealth which she had possessed was powerless to give to her child sufficient strength to enable it to stand! What a strife there had been already about that puny little creature! Its grandmother, the Princess Thekla, who was inconsolable for the loss of her favourite daughter, had been to Italy herself to obtain possession of the child, but Baron Lothar had refused peremptorily to accede to her desire. It was whispered at court that the old lady was now scheming to bestow upon her son-in-law her second daughter, the Princess Helena, for his second wife, in order that her beloved grandchild might not fall into the hands of a strange step-mother; and there were certain knowing ones who maintained that the young Princess would not say 'no' to such an arrangement, since even before her sister's marriage she had cherished a secret inclination for her handsome future brother-in-law. The Princess Helena was prettier than her sister had been, but she, too, had the large, glittering, bead-like eyes with which the child outside there was staring fixedly up into the linden boughs. It lay stretched out among the white pillows, its thin little fingers plucking nervously at the blue satin of the coverlet, while an old child's-nurse sat beside the carriage, knitting, and talking to the child incessantly.

The noise of wheels startled the young lady, and at that instant Beata, dressed for out of doors, re-entered the room. She took from the table the basket of strawberries and hung it on her arm. "For your little Elizabeth," she said to Claudine, while a faint carmine tinged her cheek.

Before the hall door a light open carriage was standing. Baron Lothar was on the box, holding the reins.

"Get in quickly, dear," Beata insisted, as Claudine,

dismayed, hesitated upon the door-step, evidently averse to accept such an attention at Neuhaus. "Those gay fellows"—she pointed to the horses, beautiful young animals, dancing with impatience—"are snorting like the steeds of the god of day, and would like to run away with us."

Immediately afterwards the carriage was rolling swiftly along beneath the lindens and on the open road. Baron Lothar guided his fiery span with easy grace, and scanned with interest, as he drove along, the fields of rye and wheat and the budding fruit on the fruit-trees on either side of the road. But never once did he glance toward the occupants of the seat behind him. He had seen Claudine's hesitation, and had read her unwillingness in her eyes. She knew it, for her look had met his, and she had seen a sarcasm in it which had sent the blood to her cheeks; but there was no help for it, they were forced to drive together—Montagues and Capulets—in the same carriage, which, with its light satin cushions and its glittering, elegant appointments, dashed through the Paulinenthal like an embodied ray of splendour from the court.

Filled with the fragrance of forest and meadow, bathed in the golden glow of the late afternoon sun, the lovely, spacious valley lay extended around them, a luxuriant landscape, watered by the winding stream that had its source far up among the mountains. Rippling and dimpling, now creeping darkly beneath drooping willows, now rushing swiftly in the broad sunshine between flowery banks, it pursued its course, the guilty stream that had repeatedly been transformed by the spring freshets into a roaring beast of prey. Who, to see it now, would dream that it had devoured so large a portion of the Gerold wealth?

The country-people were at work in all directions. The scythe of the mower swept shining through the rustling grass; in the furrows of the potato-fields long lines of women were wielding the hoe, and on the borders of the stream and along the hedge-rows bare-footed girls were driving before them their goats and geese, and knitting as they walked. From the forests on the hill-side echoed the measured stroke of the woodman's axe. There was many a hearty greeting exchanged between those thus labouring and the occupants of the carriage, and it occurred to Claudine for the first time that Beata and herself had no cause for shame in the presence of hard-handed labour. They were not useless lilies of the field, nor drones in the hive; they each laboured also, the one from an inborn impulse to industry, the other for the sake of her own self-respect, and that she might promote the welfare of those dear to her.

For a brief moment the huge slated roof of the Altenstein Geroldscourt was visible behind the trees of the garden. The flag-staff was but a bare pole; the much-lamented lost home as yet sheltered no new inmates. But along the road came a heavily-laden furniture-wagon, followed by another occupied solely by a grand piano.

"Our new neighbour is moving in, it seems," said Beata, as if to herself, scanning the passing wagons with a keen glance.

At this moment Baron Lothar turned hastily to Claudine. "You know who has bought the estate?" His tone, breaking the silence he had hitherto maintained, was that of a judge attempting to surprise a delinquent in an unguarded moment.

"How should I know?" she replied, rather sharply,

irritated by his tone. "We are trying to forget that we ever were at home on this side of the forest, and certainly we have no interest in our successors."

"Nobody in the valley knows as yet, Lothar," said Beata. "The biggest gossips in the village find that nut too hard for their teeth. I have a secret dread lest some rich manufacturer should be the purchaser, and my fear was strengthened by my glimpse of those wagons just now. Such people revel in luxury! Dreadful! Smoky factory-chimneys in our beautiful quiet valley!"

Baron Lothar had turned away again, and made no reply. The carriage rolled on, now along the forest road, where Beata, noticing how the boughs of the trees arched above mossy beds sown with wild-flowers and fanned by waving ferns, observed that she should think any one with lungs irritated by the dust of the capital would be glad indeed to stretch weary limbs on such a couch. She sat with the basket of strawberries in her lap, covered with a napkin to shield the fragrant fruit from the sun. The drive was a shorter one than that taken some weeks before in a hack.

"Look how exquisitely your Owl's Nest has decked itself!" Beata exclaimed, surprised, as the little enclosure came in sight. "I have not been here since my last visit to you and your grandmother. It has actually covered itself with a mantle of green."

She was right. In the last years of her life the late owner of the spot had planted wild vines around the tower. A couple of weeks previously the tender green of spring had tinged the net-work of tendrils and shoots that clung to the old structure, and now all was in full leaf and the windows looked out from a luxuriant screen. The vines had crept up to the

platform connecting tower and dwelling-room, had wreathed about the glass door, and hung over the balustrade like a green carpet.

Heinemann had just been showing a bird's nest in a syringa-bush to little Elizabeth, and the child was still in his arms as he advanced to meet the carriage, his bushy eyebrows elevated in wonder not unmixed with dread lest 'they should have come back with Fräulein Claudine to claim their share.'

The carriage stopped. The old gardener opened the door with a low bow, but his young mistress alone alighted. Beata sat still, and handed the strawberries to the child still in Heinemann's arms. Claudine observed with surprise a beautiful, tender smile illumine the grave face of her school-mate, and the child seemed aware that this sunbeam was a rare one, for the little thing suddenly leaned towards Beata and threw her arms around her neck. Then with a laugh of delight she took the basket from the 'big hands' which she had so lately pushed away from her favourite doll, and scrambled down out of Heinemann's arms to run to the house.

Beata arranged with the mistress of the Owl's Nest for another visit in a short time,—'a tramp through the woods that would drive all housekeeping worries out of one's head,'—and then the carriage drove off.

Baron Lothar did not again address Claudine, but he bowed low as he drove away and spoke a few kindly words to the old gardener.

"Well, well, upon my word! I'm no friend of the Neuhausers, not at all; quite the contrary! They have more luck than wisdom, and the Altensteiners must strike sail to them,—more's the pity!" said Heinemann, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking with

keen interest after the retreating carriage. "But his worst enemy must admit that he's a fine figure of a soldier, even in that simple gray coat. I've been a soldier too,—in the infantry, Fräulein Claudine,—and I know what an officer should be. When that man rides at the head of his squadron the fellows will sit square and straight on their horses, I warrant me. What he is inside every one knows,—haughty enough, and mightily stuck-up with his fine marriage. As for this,"—he made as though he were counting out money with his thumb and forefinger, looking up the while in eager inquiry into his young mistress's face,—“eh, I suppose he'll take what he can get?”

Claudine smiled. “You may rest easy, Heinemann; your discovery can be disposed of as you please——”

“What! Really? Those people are not going to take any of it?” He was nearly dancing with joy. “It's a weight off my heart, a hundred-weight! I was terribly worried about it. But that's over, thank God! Now you shall see, Fräulein Claudine, what old Heinemann can do. I'll wile the pennies out of the pocket of that rich old Bolz, that fellow in the capital who can never get enough wax from the bee-men about the country here. We can use them all; we need them now when we are likely to have plenty of fine visitors. It ought not to look poverty-stricken in the house here; we owe it to my dear old mistress to have things furbished up. I'll take the good pewter to the tinker to-morrow; he must freshen it. We need a new cream-jug, too; and suppose we get a new set of curtains for the sitting-room? Fräulein Lindenmeyer worked away mending for a week after the last wash, but, finely as she does it, some weak places will show here and there.”

"But what in the world is it all for?" Claudine asked. "Fräulein Beata——"

"Oh, who cares for her? She herself stitches and mends old rags together and hangs them up at the windows again; she's saving and frugal enough, and never would turn up her nose at a darn!" With his thumb he pointed over his shoulder to Fräulein Lindenmeyer's corner-room. "She's in there now,—the forester's wife from Oberlauter, the village gossip, who gets all the news hot and hot from the capital, and carries it about from house to house in her knitting-bag until it grows stale. Wait till you get to the house, Fräulein Claudine; you'll smell the chocolate, good vanilla, which Fräulein Lindenmeyer has been brewing a pot of in honour of her rare visitor. It's so thick the spoon will stand upright in it. Hm! And to-morrow morning our old Ma'amselle will be in bed with indigestion; but that's no business of mine. The news which our fine postilion in petticoats has brought us to-day is really worth a little discomfort; our Duke himself has bought our dear, beautiful Altenstein Geroldscourt."

Claudine was still standing by the yew-tree at the entrance to the garden. With a sudden start she clutched a bough, as if needing support. The blood rushed to her face, and then retreated, leaving it ghastly pale.

"Oh, dear heaven, how I have shocked her!" exclaimed Heinemann, startled, and putting out his arm to sustain her. "Old fool that I am! But there is nothing to be done now, nothing! And is it not a thousand times better that Geroldscourt should fall into such hands than to have some rich manufacturer set up his spinning-jennies in the halls and chambers? And

then your pleasures, Fräulein Claudine. Ask those down below there"—he pointed to the ground beneath his feet, the ancient church-yard of the nuns—"if every one of them would not have escaped with delight from the lonely forest if a hole could have been found in the high walls. You see, that is the best of it; you will get back to your associates, to your own element. Why, every flower needs its own special soil. The entire court will come for the summer to the Altenstein estate. The Duke is going to have a dairy expressly for his young wife; they say she has the consumption, poor little lady, and that cows' breath is good for her. God bless me! that remedy is like musk for Hodge as he breathes his last."

The young lady slowly and silently entered the garden and walked towards the house, her pale lips compressed. Heinemann watched her anxiously. There were signs of suffering that puzzled him in the lovely face with which he had been familiar ever since its deep blue eyes first opened upon the world. It was not distress for the lost home, as he had thought at first: it looked rather as though she were struggling with some dark power within—as though there were a conflict in the soul, while the lips were mute. He saw it in the proud carriage of the head, in the involuntary gesture. She seemed to have quite forgotten his presence.

Not another word did he say, but busied himself among his vegetables. Only when she seemed about to enter the house did he approach her and ask for leave of absence for the following day, 'because of the wax.' She nodded with a languid smile and went in.

Up in her own quiet room, she sank on a chair and clasped her hands before her face. Had it all been in

vain? Would persecution pursue her whithersoever she took refuge? No, no; she was not so helpless and unprotected as she had been weeks before. Was not her brother with her? And could she not say now, "My house is my castle. I can, and I will, close its doors to every one who has no right to cross my threshold"?

The next morning Heinemann took his way early to town. Beside him trotted a boy from the village with a hand-barrow laden with fresh vegetables for the old gardener's customers; the expedition to the town was to be made as profitable as possible. The pewter-ware was, indeed, left at home, and he had been positively forbidden to buy new curtains. From time to time he looked back with some anxiety at the house, as long as it could be seen through the trees. His peevish forebodings had proved correct. Fräulein Lindenmeyer had the headache; she was in bed and needed nursing. He would gladly have stayed at home, but the vegetables had been cut in the early morning and must not go to waste.

His young mistress was left alone, he reflected, for the occupant of the bell-room counted for nothing. Once let him take up his pen, and the world of reality had no existence for him; everything around him might burn up if only the bell-room were left standing and his ink did not run dry. This conviction in Heinemann's mind gave rise to no depreciation of Herr von Gerold; on the contrary, the old man greatly admired him; but in his eyes the learned gentleman was one to be taken care of and watched like the innocent little Elizabeth.

Well, he had done his best to lighten his young mistress's labours for the day. He had milked the goats, brought in the fresh eggs from the nests, picked the peas for dinner, piled kindling-wood on the hearth, swept the stairs, and placed the homœopathic medicine-box on the table in Fräulein Lindenmeyer's room, with a paper of directions beside it in his own handwriting. Fräulein Lindenmeyer had the greatest confidence in his medical capacity. As he was quite unaccustomed to close the garden gate, let alone latch it, he left it ajar. The dog, whose kennel was near the fence, was sure to bark if it creaked upon its hinges; and what was there to steal in the garden? The chickens were confined behind high palisades, and the cat prowled about the ruins and the forest as she chose. The old man never thought of little Elizabeth. She was usually his inseparable companion in the garden, prattling to him indefatigably as he worked; he was always ready to talk to her and to answer her questions, only pausing now and then from his labours to brush the earth from his hard, horny hands that he might set her hat straight on her curls, or smooth her doll's dishevelled locks. He had never known the child to go as far as the gate by herself; and Claudine, too, thought her afraid of the dog chained near by, and so went about her household tasks with an easy mind, while the little one was playing in the garden. She heard the doll's carriage rolling on the gravel path, and smiled on hearing the child's voice, now raised admonishingly and now gently soothing her charge.

Thus it drew on to noon; the heat increased; only at long intervals did a single floating cloud, like some giant bird, cast a beneficent shadow for a few moments upon the flowers, hanging their heads in the sultry air.

Claudine went to the window and called the child; but the silence outside, whence came no reply, startled her. The dog rattled his chain as he crept out of his close kennel, and pricked his ears at the sound of her voice. The child was not to be seen.

Still, Claudine was not anxious; the little one often went directly up from the garden to the bell-room to carry her father some flowers or an apronful of wonderful stones. Claudine hastened up there; but in the cool, darkened tower-chamber her brother was sitting alone at the northern window so absorbed in his work that he only shook his head absently with a loving glance at the intruder in answer to her inquiry, and then went on writing. Nor was the child in Fräulein Lindenmeyer's room; and Claudine, now anxious indeed, flew down into the garden.

The doll's carriage was in the arbour, the wax face of the baby-doll covered carefully with the child's apron, which she had taken off, but the little nurse was not there. Nor was she in the corner of the eloisiers with the goats and the chickens, nor in the ruined chapel, where she loved to tumble about upon the grass and pluck daisies for the 'poor ladies,' as she called the carven stone figures of nuns and abbesses on the mossy gravestones, now for the most part leaning against the old walls. Claudine called her and sought her in vain.

As she looked over the picket-fence along the forest road she saw a scarlet peony lying there, and instantly she knew that the child must have left the garden and dropped it. Without a moment's hesitation she ran out and down the road.

Its course stretched out into the distance lonely and quiet; the highway was near enough to be preferred

to this forest pathway, and its silence was seldom broken by the noise of wheels. There was no fear that the child would be run over. She must have made a raid upon Heinemann's beds, and her little hands had evidently had more flowers in them than they could carry, for here and there a dropped pansy or spray of jessamine showed where she had passed along.

She must have been gone for a considerable time, at least Claudine seemed to have walked on for an endless distance. Tears of anxiety filled her eyes, and her heart throbbed as though it would burst. At last she found on the ground the little hat of the favourite doll Lena, near the thicket that bordered the road. What if the child had plunged into its depths and were wandering there lost! Claudine was just about to put forth all her strength in a loud call, when she heard, not very far off, the sound of childish prattle mingling with manly tones; it came from where the road made so sharp a turn that the woods hid it from sight. Involuntarily she clasped her hands upon her heart and listened. Yes, it was Baron Lothar who was speaking, and the child was with him. A few more hurried steps, and she came in sight of the pair.

Baron Lothar was walking, his horse's bridle over his left arm, while he carried the little truant on his right. Her hat hung down behind her head, and her fair curls lay in dishevelled masses on her forehead and about her flushed cheeks. She must have paid dear already for her heroic enterprise, for her eyes were red with crying; but even in her terror and helplessness she had clung to her beloved Lena. The doll was clasped tight to her breast with one arm, while the other was about Lothar's neck.

She cried out when she saw her beautiful aunt suddenly approaching. "I wanted to take the strawberry-lady some flowers, but it was so far,—so far! And Lena has lost her pretty new hat," she called out, unclasping her arm from the neck of her bearer, as if to flee to her aunt's protection, but she was held tight.

"No, stay with me, child," said Baron Lothar. She put down her head like a startled bird, and looked timidly into the bearded face close to her own; the tone of command was new to her. "It is your own fault, little gypsy," he went on to the child, with an expressive glance at the agitated face and tearful eyes of the lovely maid of honour, who was standing before him, breathless, and trying to express her thanks. "Oh, you are very ready to forsake me now, with never a thought whether those arms are able to carry you! You cannot run another step on your poor tired little legs! No, no, let her alone!" he went on to Claudine, who raised her arms to take his burden from him. "She is no more weight for me than if a grasshopper had lighted on my arm. Come, little one, put your arm around my neck again, and don't look at me so timidly; my beard did not frighten you before. See how good and obedient my horse is, walking beside me!—and there is the unfortunate hat that has cost you such bitter tears."

The child laughed with delight as Claudine put the hat on the doll's head and tied it tightly.

Baron Lothar looked at the two slender hands, whose beauty had been so admired at court, and upon one of which, as they tied the strings of the little hat, a dark stain was plainly visible.

"'Rust-stains are no disgrace,' my old Heinemann

says," she stammered, as she hastily finished tying the strings.

"No, no disgrace. But that they should be there! Was there really no one to be found in the Owl's Nest who could save you from such rude contact?" An incredulous, half-contemptuous smile was on his face. "Will there not surely come a time when the remembrance of such stains may be felt as a reproach?" His ardent eyes never left her face.

She looked at him with haughty indignation. "Has the gossip of the court also informed you that I am false, and fond of acting a farce?" she asked. "Must I state to you expressly the painful fact that my brother—although, thank God! with every debt paid—has been driven from his house and land, a beggar? We can no longer afford to keep a servant, and I am now perfectly aware that this involves no great amount of self-denial. 'These stains'—she looked down at her hands—"can be no reproach in my eyes, except as they bear witness to my awkwardness, and that grows less from day to day." She smiled brightly, for she saw a dark flush mount to his forehead, and she could not reprove more severely the man who was carrying so tenderly her tired little darling. "I shall soon have no cause to be ashamed; and really yesterday evening I might without fear have invited Beata, the careful, to share my ridiculed omelette——"

"I am sure of it, and beg to tender my apology," he interrupted her, bowing low with sarcastic deference. "You not only seem Cinderella, you are really the maiden herself. A man can hardly imagine the charm of such a situation, but doubtless there is one in donning the gray chrysalis from which, later, the brilliant butterfly will emerge to flutter its wings in the sunshine."

She was silent, dreading the sound of her own voice should she so much as allude to that which she kept hidden away in the depths of her consciousness, but to which he seemed obstinately bent upon referring. The expression of his eager, manly face agitated her against her will.

She stepped aside to allow him to pass, and he walked on beneath the overhanging beeches. For a while there was no sound save of his tread and of the tramp of the horse patiently following him; the silence was finally broken by little Elizabeth's apostrophizing the 'dear, good horse.'

"She is not the least like her brunette Spanish mother, this blond little maiden," said Baron Lothar, looking at the charming little face leaning towards the horse. "She has the Altenstein eyes. At Neuhaus there is a picture of my great-grandmother, who, you know, was an Altenstein. Wild as I was as a boy, and little as I cared for the stiff portraits on the walls, I always was attracted by that large picture hanging in our state drawing-room upon the occasions when it was thrown open. Ulrich, who was Duke in her day, called her 'the lily of the valley.' But she was a shy dame; she never went to court after the Duke one day kissed her hand rather too ardently."

There was another silence, in which the crunching of the gravel beneath the tread of the horse mingled with the twittering of young birds in a nest overhead.

"There are little birds up there, I know; Heine-mann lifts me up and lets me look into nests sometimes," the child said, with a longing look upward.

He laughed. "That is too high, little one, for us to reach. But, ah, how blue eyes can sparkle! I do not believe that the starlight in my beautiful grandmother's

eyes ever was so brilliant. None of the Neuhaus Gerolds inherited that fair face, with its blond curls, many as were the daughters of the line. I thought that feminine type unique. But later, much later, I discovered that that face was an inheritance of the Altensteins. It was at our court. I had been hunting with the Duke, and we returned late and went to the drawing-room of the Dowager Duchess just as a new lady-in-waiting was going to the piano to sing Mozart's 'Violet.' He leaned forward to look into Claudine's face. "Of course you do not remember that evening?"

She shook her head and blushed. "No, I have had to sing 'The Violet' so often that I have no remembrance of any special occasion when I sang it."

He had stayed his steps for a moment, but now he went on more quickly. For an artist the group then walking along the forest road would have made a fine subject for a picture of a fugitive family. The noble, manly figure, with his horse's bridle thrown around one arm, while on the other he carried the weary child with such graceful ease, and the feminine form beside him, her long skirt caught up through her girdle that it might not impede her steps, and the luxuriant waves of her hair uncovered, so that the sunbeams flickering through the beechen boughs touched them here and there with gold,—the pair looked as if they belonged to each other, sharing joy and sorrow, like 'those whom God hath joined together.'

A few more moments, and the gay colours of the garden showed through the trees, and the barking of the dog was heard. Herr von Gerold had probably gradually awakened to a sense of the sudden appearance of his sister in the bell-room and her hurried inquiries after the child. He had also heard her calling

it, and had finally bestirred himself to search for it. He came rapidly towards the group, and between the ivy-wreathed posts at the garden gate appeared a female head carefully wrapped up and nightcapped. Fräulein Lindenmeyer, in her anxiety, had ventured to the very bottom of the garden; but at sight of the tall, manly figure she turned and ran back to the house like one possessed, her skirts flying and her shawl hastily pulled over her head.

A few days previously Herr von Gerold would have passed by his Neuhaus kinsman as a stranger, without any sentiment of relationship, as had always been the case at the university; but yesterday Baron Lothar had shown special courtesy to Claudine, and to-day he had brought back the lost child to her father. Therefore he hastened gratefully towards him, and, after a few words of explanation from Claudine, the two men shook hands cordially. And Baron Lothar made no move to mount his horse and depart after Herr von Gerold had taken the child from him. He walked on between the brother and sister, talking with them, as far as the garden gate, and then, without any hesitation, quite as though it were a matter of course, he accepted Herr von Gerold's invitation to enter and inspect the interesting discovery of wax. He had, he declared, taken his ride this way to-day for the sake of seeing the Owl's Nest, which had impressed him yesterday as charming.

Claudine hurried on to the house before the others. On the threshold of the door she could not help smiling. Was not all this like the transformations in some old fairy-tale? There was the man whose presence had but lately diffused such splendour at court carefully leading his horse among Heinemann's cherished flowers,

taking pains that the steed's hoof should crush no leaf that might be a means of profit to the old man; and here was she, only a short while ago the petted and caressed maid of honour, special favourite of the Dowager Duchess, hurrying down the worn cellar-stairs to bring for his refreshment a bottle of wine from the small store left by her grandmother!

He led his horse to a shady corner among the chapel ruins and tied it to a stout juniper-tree which had found a lodgement there and was spreading its dark greenery lovingly above the desecrated walls, and then he came into the house.

He bestowed but little attention upon the store of wax in the cellar; it was easy to see that it was not the prosaic production of the nuns that had suddenly awakened his interest in the Owl's Nest. Indeed, he frankly confessed that he greatly preferred the vine-wreathed gallery and bell-tower outside, to the result of the domestic industry and thrifty love of gain of the devout recluses.

Therefore Claudine placed a table, with the wine and glasses and a fresh bunch of flowers, outside of the glass door leading from the sitting-room into the open air.

Close by the wall of the low, connecting building there stood an ancient linden, the last remnant of a former avenue, and already partly dead from age. The only boughs in which the sap still flowed stretched far over the balustrade; they were in luxuriant leaf, and with a small awning extended there made a shady nook, whence could be seen two slender, isolated columns, the only ones remaining of the magnificent row that had once sustained the nave of the church, and behind them the arched stone frame of a pointed

Gothic window in the eastern wall. Through the other windows, in the course of years, the forest-trees growing close on the outside of the walls had thrust their boughs, and the vines wreathing their trunks had climbed across the sills, to cling to the inner walls of the ruined temple. But the two columns and the arch of the eastern window enclosed a small shady bit of woodland, a peaceful island of green, over which the deer wandered fearlessly.

Baron Lothar stepped up to the balustrade and gazed with folded arms down the charming vista.

"Our German forests are also fine," said Herr von Gerold, the traveller, in his gentle voice, as he stood beside him.

"What?" Baron Lothar turned upon him hastily. "Also? I say our German forests *alone* are fine. What do I care for palms and mangoes, or for the soft southern breeze that breathes upon my face like a caress from an unloved hand! I have been fairly ill with longing for the Thuringian forest and its bracing air, its deep shades, and its dank undergrowth that opposes so firm a barrier to the huntsman; ill with longing for its winter blasts that rage among its boughs and challenge all my strength to battle against them. No; and I confess, even at the risk of being set down as a barbarian, a German bear, that all the treasures of art did not help me to overcome my homesickness; for I do not understand them. I understand them no better than do most of my countrymen who undertake yearly pilgrimages in crowds to the South, however they may pretend and fall into ecstasies."

Herr von Gerold laughed; he was well acquainted with the affectation of which Lothar spoke; but Claudine, who was just then filling the glasses with wine,

said, with a glance towards the speaker by the balustrade, "You understand music all the better."

"Who told you so?" he asked, frowning. "To my knowledge I never allowed my light to shine at court. Did you ever see me touch a piano there?—But, you see,"—he turned to Herr von Gerold,—"because there has been some vague rumour of my sacrificing, in the privacy of my own study, to my gods, Beethoven and Bach, they are trying to keep me by appealing to this weakness of mine. Not on my account. Heaven forbid! If it were not for my little daughter I might go live among the Hottentots, and no one would care; but they want the child in the capital, and therefore his Highness graciously offers me the post of impresario." He laughed in a forced way. "A charming idea! I am to manage the springs of the wooden and paste-board world, consort with odious prime-donne and ballet-dancers, and in the end learn intrigue, that I may not be ruined by it. God forbid! I would rather retire absolutely to Neuhaus or to my estate in Saxony, and hunt and sow and reap and follow the plough, if need be, for I could in that case at least preserve my soul and body in health."

He took one of the filled wineglasses from the salver which Claudine offered him. "But you? I see only two glasses," he said to her. "At court I remember you always contrived with admirable dexterity to avoid clinking your glass with mine. I understood it: Montague and Capulet confronted each other; but to-day it is different. I am here as your guest, and if you will not allow me to drink specially to your health, I can certainly pray you to join me in remembrance of one whom we both love,—in wishing health to the venerable Dowager Duchess."

Claudine made haste to bring another glass, and shortly afterwards the three clinked musically in the quiet air.

"These ancient trees will wonder," said Herr von Gerold, gayly, looking up at the lofty oaks which had beheld the grand convent of St. Walpurga wrapped in a royal robe of crimson flame, and the stately wooden figure of the saint in its costly silken vestments reduced to a heap of ashes. "Since the orgy held by the iconoclasts among the wine-casks of the burning convent no glass has been heard to clink here until now; and it sounded so clear and loud, so full of the promise of future joy, that I should like to propose another health,—that of one whom I honour, although I do not know him personally; a noble man, a zealous patron of the arts and sciences; he loves poesy. Long live our Duke!" At that moment the golden Rhine wine was scattered on the air from Baron Lothar's glass, which fell from his hand and was shattered on the ground.

"Ah, forgive me for my clumsiness! I am very awkward," he said, with an odd smile. "But this old fellow"—he pointed to the linden bough against which he had struck his arm—"is still too sturdy to yield an inch. Well, his Highness's health does not depend upon my wishes." He drew on his gloves and took up his riding-whip. "I have abused your hospitality, and my immediate self-banishment shall be my punishment. I should have liked to stay longer in this peaceful retreat, and to have a look into the bell-tower, but that must be for another time. And now come here, little truant." Elizabeth had been sitting quietly in her small arm-chair by the balustrade, and as he spoke he lifted her in his arms and kissed her. "No more walks outside the gate, do you hear? If you want to visit

the strawberry-lady, tell me, and I will come in the carriage and take you to her as often as you choose."

The child nodded shyly, and tried to get down from his arms.

"Was Cousin Lothar angry?" she asked her father, when he returned from escorting the visitor to the gate.

"No, my child, not angry; only a little odd," he replied. "Our poor glass, and that capital wine—the linden-bough was not to blame! Tell me, Claudine," and he turned to his sister, who was standing by the balustrade, leaning forward slightly, as if listening to the sound of the horse's hoofs in the distance, "was not Lothar a special favourite of the Duke's?"

"He still is so," she said, her face turned from him. "You heard how they are trying to keep him in the capital." Her voice was not quite steady, and the smile with which she passed her brother on her way to the kitchen to prepare the mid-day meal was forced. There, in the centre of the sitting-room, stood the table already set with its three places. Yes, the dented pewter plates from which they ate were old-fashioned enough. Her grandmother, when she retired to her dower-house, had left behind her all her silver,—the store of magnificent silver-plate was not to be broken up,—and had taken with her only her inherited pewter dishes and plates, "quite suitable for a widowed recluse who had but a few days to live," she declared. With her limited income, which her grandson's pecuniary embarrassments curtailed still further, it was sensible to use ware that would not break. The knives and forks had black, defaced wooden handles, and a piece of thin oil-cloth was spread in the centre of the table to save the table-cloth,—all very plebeian and economical, although scrupulously neat and clean.

He had seen it all as he passed through the room, and it was well that he had done so. There could be no talk of playing a part; the whole footing of the establishment showed the determination of its owners to accommodate themselves to their changed circumstances. He must now be aware that she had been in earnest in her flight.

The ducal family owned various castles in the country, fine, ancient piles, with magnificent gardens and extensive parks, but they were situated for the most part in the vicinity of towns, or on level plains where the parks were bordered by vast meadows, and where the forests were so distant that they showed only as a dark line on the horizon. The ancestors of the present Duke had been fond of the sunny plains, and had shunned the wooded portions of their domains when they indulged their taste for building, and although they had been passionate lovers of the chase, and had often spent weeks in the forests hunting, certain very primitive hunting-lodges, scattered here and there, had sufficed for their shelter at night and for the preparation of their simple meals.

Every one admitted, therefore, that Altenstein Geroldscourt, with its adjacent forests and its bracing mountain-air, was a most valuable acquisition for the Duke. His three delicate young sons, with their frail, invalid mother, could have no healthier place of residence in the hot summer, and the zeal and haste with which Geroldscourt was made ready for its princely possessors were but natural. The youthful Duchess herself pushed forward these preparations with fever-

ish eagerness; no baths, no change of climate, had hitherto availed to restore her failing health; she hoped everything from the air of the forest here. Therefore, by the Duke's orders, the various buildings had been left pretty much as they were; not a wall had been changed, not a garden-plot rearranged; and when they brought to his Highness for his approval a sketch of a fine modern fountain to replace the one in the court-yard, which, although finely carved and decorated, was rustic in design, he frowned, and ordered that the fountain should be left just as it was. He was seriously angry when he discovered that the hawthorns and syringas in the corner of the court-yard had been torn away root and branch to let more light into the apartments of the ladies-in-waiting, and there were wry faces among the royal servants when the Duke appointed as castellan of Geroldscourt old Friedrich Kern, late coachman, gardener, and footman all in one to the last Altenstein lord. His Highness thought with justice that so faithful a servant would be the best man to take charge of his new estate.

Thus the exterior physiognomy of Geroldscourt was but little altered; and in the interior there was still many an heirloom which the Duke had ordered to be purchased, and which occupied its old place. The rare Meissen candelabra with the antique girandoles were still in one of the drawing-rooms, with much of the rococo furniture inlaid with the Altenstein arms and initials in mother-of-pearl and silver. Everything else, to be sure, was new, and the peaceful sleepers beneath the chapel pavement, if the fancy had taken them for a ghostly tour of inspection, would hardly have recognized their old haunts, so great was the display everywhere of princely luxury and rich artistic decoration.

Day and night workmen had been busy at Gerolds-court, and the railway had transported hither the finest that Paris and Vienna could afford of furniture and hangings. By the end of July all was ready for the court to migrate to the Paulinenthal.

There were changes too at the Owl's Nest. Heinemann had made a 'splendid trade,' as he expressed it, rubbing his hands the while in high glee. One day a wagon drew up at the garden gate, and all the product of the industry of bees and nuns, which had been garnered up underground for centuries, was brought out into the light of day and sent abroad into the world to serve the uses of mankind. When Heinemann, as the result of his sale, laid before his young mistress at her writing-table a goodly pile of bank-notes, he remarked, with the twinkle of the eye that so well became his honest face, that he thought there might now be a little more butter allowed with the tea-cakes and a larger piece of meat in the soup-pot, not to speak of the new curtains, which must surely be bought now, as there were so many eyes to glance from the road towards the windows of the corner-room.

Yes, the road certainly had become more frequented, and Fräulein Lindenmeyer wore her spectacles pushed up upon her forehead oftener than before her eyes. She continually dropped her stitches, and complained that she could scarcely finish her sentences when reading, there was so much going on in the road. But as she spoke she smiled with delight, for "although the forest solitude was lovely,—else surely the poets would not praise it so constantly as they did,—yes, really heavenly, still sometimes, when the entire day was spent without the passing of even a wood-cart

or a labourer, or even a huckster-woman from the village, it was just the least bit lonesome."

The three little princes, with their servants and train, were the first to arrive at Geroldscourt, and the path to the Owl's Nest must have pleased them greatly, for they made their appearance there daily. The sight of them trotting up on their ponies rejoiced the eyes of Ma'amselle, sitting knitting at her window; and no less did she enjoy seeing the well-appointed equipage from Neuhaus drive past: it always went very slowly; and Frau von Berg, handsome and portly, sat inside with the Princess Katharina's pale little child on her lap, while Baron Lothar drove his little daughter himself.

Heinemann contrived to be always busy with his rose-bushes when the carriage went by, and he persistently turned his back to it, for he detested the sight of the stout Frau, 'wedged in among the cushions' as if she were the Princess herself. Had he not with his own eyes seen how she turned away her head, as if some poisonous beetle had flown in her face, when his young mistress had been standing on the gallery, in her pretty white muslin gown, looking as beautiful as an angel? And had she not, the first time she drove past the Owl's Nest, examined it scornfully through her eye-glass, and then scanned him, Heinemann, in the most arrogant manner, as if expecting him to bow his very lowest on the instant? She would wait a long time before he bent his head before her!

It was very different when Baron Lothar came riding past on his spirited chestnut. Then the finest rose in the garden was plucked and handed across the hedge to the rider, who always stuck it in his button-

hole. And Heinemann frankly confessed that he did not understand how it was, but he could not cherish any more dislike for the Neuhauser; he liked to look up into his fine, fiery soldier-eyes as he talked with him across the picket-fence.

Beata, too, had paid several visits to the Owl's Nest. She always came afoot, and stayed to take a cup of coffee, and, little as she was wont to speak of her own likings, she declared to Claudine that she looked forward to these visits all through the week. The two school-mates would sit at their coffee on the gallery, and little Elizabeth would gambol and play about them. And although Herr von Gerold could never quite make up his mind to go down and welcome the visitor,—he shuddered at the remembrance of the encounter on the staircase at Geroldscourt,—he often looked from his window in the bell-room and saw how confidently his little girl nestled in 'Cousin Beata's' lap, and how tenderly the large brown hands stroked the child's fair curls. Baron Lothar always drove over for his sister towards evening, and then Heinemann held the horses while the Neuhauser paid his respects to the ladies on the gallery and sometimes went up to the bell-room to bid the recluse there good-evening.

And now the ducal family had all moved out to Geroldscourt, and the flag was flying from its roof-tree. The villagers had gathered by the roadside, and had been fairly stunned by the splendour and magnificence of the ducal equipages and by the multitude of attendants and servants that arrived in humbler vehicles. Why, there would not be one empty room at Geroldscourt! The Altenstein mansion was an extensive structure; generation after generation had enlarged and improved it; its architectural pretensions

and its size were imposing enough to allow of its being called a castle.

The afternoon sun shone broadly upon its front, flanked by two octagonal towers, and brought into relief the delicate yet forcible fret-work of its roofs and window-frames, while through the open sashes the air, laden with the odour of the pines and the invigorating aroma of the forest, streamed into the house, —a delicious air. “My fountain of health!” said the young Duchess Elise, in her low, husky voice.

It was the second day after her arrival. The day before, after her fatiguing drive hither, she had, by her physician’s advice, kept her bed; but to-day, ‘already feeling wonderfully better,’ she had, upon her husband’s arm, walked through the suite of rooms in the upper story. And she recalled with a shudder the hot glare of the sun, here where the sun did not scorch, but where its light came delicately emerald in color through the luxuriant green.

“Here I shall once more be your fleet-footed fawn, your merry Liesel, shall I not, Adalbert?” the young Duchess said, as her eyes sought tenderly those of the tall, handsome man with whose step she made a great effort to keep pace. Yes, ethereally pale and shadowy as was the little figure in the simple white dress reflected in the tall mirrors as she passed them, she should soon be well here,—the thin cheeks would regain their rounded outline, the form recover the elastic grace which had formerly caused it to be admired as sylph-like. Two months of this delicious forest air and all would surely be well again.

She occupied the rooms in the eastern wing adjoining the dining-hall and looking out into the courtyard, separated from those of her husband in the

western wing only by a reception-room common to both. The last room in the long suite was his study, from which a door in one corner led out upon the balcony of the tower. The walls were covered with exquisite paintings,—Spanish landscapes from which a southern sun rayed forth a golden glow. A heavy purple plush curtain looped on either side hung across the door opening on the balcony.

In the centre of the room stood a step-ladder. Old Friedrich—or rather the Castellan Kern, as he was now called—had been hanging up a chandelier that had just arrived, and at sight of the ducal pair he scrambled hurriedly down the steps.

Involuntarily the Duchess paused on the threshold. “Ah, this was the poor Spaniard’s room!” she exclaimed, with a slight tremor in her voice. “Did she die here?” she asked, fixing her feverishly-bright eyes with a look of inquiry in them upon the old man, who bowed low.

“No, your Highness, not here. Herr von Gerold had this room painted for her at great expense, but she could not stay here an hour. The farm is too near. She could not bear to hear a cow low, and if a hay-wagon rattled over the ground, or the threshers were at work in the barns, she would put her fingers in her ears and run through the rooms and passages until she found a quiet corner, where she could crouch like a timid little kitten. Ah, she was not fitted to be mistress here! She was always quiet and sad, and she would not eat; now and then she would break off a corner of a cake of chocolate; that was what kept her alive. At last she lived in the summer-house, and when the weather was fine she was wrapped up in silken, downy coverlets and carried out and laid upon

the mossy ground just on the borders of the forest at the foot of the garden. That was the place she liked best in our pale country, as she called our dear Thuringia, and there she dropped asleep for the last time on an autumn day; all was over. She died of homesickness, they said."

The Duchess advanced into the room and gazed round her at the paintings on the walls.

"Homesickness!" she repeated, shaking her head gently. "She ought not to have married her German husband, for she did not love him. I should not be homesick if I were to go with you to wastes of ice and snow," she whispered, tenderly, looking up into the face of her companion, as together they went to the open door of the balcony.

He smiled down upon her kindly. She sank into a low cushioned seat and looked abroad over the landscape in a rapture of delight.

"What a delicious view!" she said, clasping her small waxen hands in her lap. "The Gerolds understood better than we, Adalbert, how to choose the site for the home of their race," she went on, after a moment's pause. "In all our castles and country-seats we have not a single view equal to this.—Who occupied this wing?" she asked the castellan, who was noiselessly preparing to depart with the step-ladder.

"Only the ladies, your Highness, for as long as I have been at Geroldscourt," the old man made reply, carefully setting down the ladder. "First the late councillor's wife, until she retired to the Owl's Nest, and then the colonel's wife. And two rooms farther on belonged to our Fräulein."

"Ah, the beautiful Claudine!" the Duchess exclaimed, in a tone of inquiry.

"The same, your Highness; Fräulein Claudine von Gerold. She was born in one of those rooms. I remember when the little angel was first shown to us on a white cushion."

"Mamma's favourite; do you hear, Adalbert?" the Duchess said with a smile to her husband, who was standing at one of the windows gazing into the distance, apparently lost in thought. "The swan, as her poetical brother calls her in his poems,—the remarkable girl who left the court to embrace a life of poverty that she might be a help to her brother.—Owl's Nest is the name of the forest retreat where Fräulein von Gerold now lives, is it not?" she asked the castellan.

He bowed. "Walpurgiszella is its real name, your Highness. But the old Frau von Gerold called it 'my Owl's Nest' when she first saw the ruins by moonlight, and there was a whirring of wings and a screaming all about her, as if every corner were filled with little children. And it has been called the Owl's Nest ever since, although the feathered rogues no longer have it their own way there. It is very comfortable now in the tower, where they were the thickest. Oh, yes, the tower,"—he stroked his faultlessly shaven chin as he spoke,—“all the country round has been talking of the old tower for the last few days. They say there has been a treasure discovered in the cellar there."

"A treasure in money?" the Duke asked, eagerly, turning from the window and holding back the violet plush curtain, that he might look the castellan in the face.

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "In coin, your Highness? I hardly think so. They tell of an im-

mense treasure of gold and silver and jewels; but"—a dry smile flitted across his face—"I know my good friend Heinemann, the old rogue; he would be certain to tell wonderful tales to any one who should ask him, and most likely the wonderful treasure will dwindle to a single sacramental cup."

The large, brilliant eyes of the Duchess were riveted upon the old man, like those of a child listening to a fairy-tale.

"A treasure?" she asked. Then she paused, and her smile was replaced by a haughty, cool expression. Between the curtains of the opposite portière appeared a gentleman, who advanced with a respectful inclination. She bent her head in a scarcely perceptible acknowledgment of his salute, and turned away to the window with a nervous quiver of her delicate lips, while the Duke said, graciously,—

"Well, Palmer, what have you to tell us now that is disagreeable? Are the rafters worm-eaten, or are your rooms haunted?"

"Your Highness is pleased to jest," was the reply. "My warnings with regard to the purchase of Altenstein were the result of my sense of duty as a faithful servant, and I am sure your Highness did not misunderstand me. At present I have only what is agreeable to announce. Baron Lothar Gerold begs to be permitted to pay his respects to his noble neighbour."

The Duchess turned eagerly. "Oh, he is cordially welcome!" she exclaimed; and when, after a few moments, Lothar entered the room, she held out her transparent hand to him with, "My dear Baron, what a pleasure!"

The Baron took her hand and carried it reverently to his lips. Then, bowing to the Duke, he said, in his

deep, musical voice, "Your Highness will allow me to announce my return home; I propose now to remain here."

"It is high time, cousin; you have made us wait long enough for you," replied the Duke, offering him his hand.

"Alas that you come alone, my dear Gerold!" said the Duchess, again extending her hand to him, her fine eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Poor Katharina!"

"I have brought my child home with me, your Highness," he replied, gravely.

"I know, Gerold, I know! But a child is merely a child, and can only partially replace our life's companion."

She spoke almost passionately, and her eyes sought the Duke, who stood leaning against a costly inlaid cabinet, and, as if he were not listening, gazing out among the linden boughs waving in the broad afternoon sunshine.

There was a pause; the Duchess looked down, and from beneath her eyelashes a couple of tears rolled over her cheeks; she brushed them away as she said, "It must be so hard to die in the midst of perfect happiness!"

Another pause ensued. The three were alone in the apartment; the old castellan had slipped out with his ladder, and Palmer, the Duke's private secretary and a much-envied favourite with his master, was standing in the next room, behind a window-curtain, immovable as a statue.

"Apropos, Baron Gerold," the Duchess began again quite eagerly, "have you heard the wondrous tale of the discovery that has been made at the Owl's Nest?"

"Of a truth, your Highness, the old ruins have

yielded up their treasure," Baron Lothar replied, evidently relieved.

"Indeed?" said the Duke, smiling incredulously. "What is it?—sacramental vessels? coined gold?"

"Nothing of silver or gold, your Highness. It is wax, simple, yellow wax, walled up there by the nuns at the approach of the enemy."

"Wax?" the Duchess repeated, in a tone of disappointment.

"Wax, your Highness, is as good as coined money when it is genuine and unadulterated. Nowadays——"

"Have you seen it?" the Duke interrupted him.

"Certainly, your Highness. I inspected the treasure where it was found."

"Then the axe has been buried that was for so long above-ground between the Altensteiners and the Neuhausers," his Highness said, composedly.

"My sister Beata, your Highness, and Claudine von Gerold have been friends from childhood," was the reply, as quietly uttered.

"Ah, indeed!" said the Duke, a shade more indifferently than before, turning to the window again.

"But, my dear Gerold, I should like to see this waxen treasure!" exclaimed the Duchess.

"Then your Highness must make haste, for the traders are after it like wasps about a ripe pear."

"Do you hear, Adalbert? Shall we not drive over?"

"To-morrow, or the day after, Liesel; whenever you like; only let us make sure that we shall not intrude."

"Intrude? Intrude upon Claudine? I am sure she will be glad to see some one in her solitude. Pray, Adalbert, give orders to have us go now."

The Duke turned to her. "Now?" he asked; and his handsome face changed colour slightly.

"Now, Adalbert, please!"

She had risen and approached her husband, laying her hand entreatingly upon his; her eyes, her unnaturally brilliant eyes, looked up at him imploring as those of a child.

He looked out, as if to make sure of the weather. "But the drive in the cool of the evening?" he murmured.

"Oh, in the delicious forest air!" she begged. "I am quite well, Adalbert, really quite well."

He nodded assent, and gave orders to Palmer, who just then entered, to have the carriages brought round. Then, after inviting Lothar to accompany them, he gave his arm to the Duchess, and conducted her to her rooms to make ready for the drive.

The Neuhauser gazed gloomily after the pair; what had become of the Duchess during his absence, of the elegant although delicate woman so ardently enthusiastic, so eager for all that was beautiful and true?—the woman who had undertaken the duties of her position as parent of her people with a zeal that was wellnigh fanatical? Here was but a pale shadow of herself; the fire that gleamed in her eyes was the glow of fever; the gayety which had formerly so charmed every one was now a nervous restlessness, that constantly revealed the invalid. And he? The curtain had just closed behind his tall and strikingly fine figure, the very personification of strength, a genuine ancient German, with his fair, waving hair, blue eyes, characteristic repose of manner, and obstinacy in carrying out his will. Baron Lothar could not have told why, but the memory of a hunt in which they had both shared occurred to him. The Duke had started a magnificent 'stag of ten,' which had

escaped him ; he followed it for days and nights with a single huntsman as his companion, and with unequalled endurance he underwent all the hardships of the chase. At last on the fourth morning he rejoined his party, in soiled attire, drenched by the rain which had fallen on the previous night, and with boots heavy with clay,—but he had shot the stag at dawn. Yes, obstinate in the extreme, and therefore——

Lothar's gaze was still riveted on the violet portière, when Herr von Palmer appeared, and approached with elegant ease of manner.

"Allow me also, Herr Baron," began the little man, whose hair, already grizzled, curled close about his temples, "to welcome you back to your native soil. You have been too much missed at court not to be greeted with enthusiasm upon your return."

Baron Lothar looked down from his superior height into the sallow face of the speaker without moving a muscle of his own. "A peculiar face,—a genuine sharper's physiognomy," he said to himself, observing the southern olive complexion, the bold dark eyes overshadowed by heavy eyebrows, and the forehead from which the hair had largely retreated. "Thank you," he replied coldly, and his eyes wandered from the little man's face to the glowing colours of the paintings on the walls.

"How do her Highness's looks strike you, Herr Baron?" asked Palmer, his features assuming a melancholy expression. And when he whom he addressed seemed, lost in thought, to have failed to hear his question, he added, "We shall have a very quiet winter, for she is dying. And then——"

Lothar turned suddenly and looked at the speaker. "And then?" he asked, and his regular features wore

for an instant so menacing a look that Palmer did not reply. "And then?"

At that moment the carriages were announced, and Baron Lothar strode past Palmer without awaiting an answer.

As he took his seat opposite the ducal pair his face had grown quite pale. The carriage rolled swiftly along the wonderfully well kept road and into the odorous pine forest. The emaciated face of the young Duchess showed in startling pallor in contrast with the crimson silk tissue of her gown, but it was instinct with delight in existence, the longing to live and to enjoy. Her pale lips were parted, showing the small pearly teeth, her glittering eyes beneath her sailor hat with its simple crimson ribbon looked eagerly into the forest as if to pierce its mysterious depths, and her chest rose and fell as if she were drinking in health with every breath.

"Yes—dying!" Lothar said to himself. "And then—then?"

The Duke, leaning back among the cushions beside his wife, seemed to have no thought except for the rustic fence that separated them from the forest.

And then? Baron Gerold was only too well aware of the secret known to all the world; it had had wings, and had pursued him to the quiet villa by the Mediterranean. He was not surprised when he heard of the Duke's passion; he had seen its dawn, and had clinched his fist the first time he heard his royal Highness's name coupled with hers.

Her Highness began to talk, and of Claudine, and he was obliged to answer, although he would fain have laid his hand upon her lips.

Behind them rolled the carriage containing the

Duchess's oldest lady-in-waiting, the Freiin von Katzenstein. Beside this kindly old lady sat Palmer with a bitter-sweet smile; that the Duke should find his way to the Owl's Nest at this early date seemed to him over-eager.

Suddenly the barouche stood still. He leaned forward over the side, and the bitter-sweet smile deepened. At a little distance in front was the ducal equipage, and drawn up on the side of the road another,—the Neuhaus carriage; Palmer recognized it by the spirited horses and the orange cockade of the coachman. And then Baron Gerold alighted and handed to the Duchess a white bundle decorated with blue ribbons,—his child.

"Ah, Frau von Berg with Princess Katharina's child," said the Freiin, putting up her eye-glasses. "They say it is a puny little thing. I am sorry for poor Berg."

Herr von Palmer leaned back in his seat again, making no reply to the last remark, but still smiling. How rural and domestic it all was! At last the horses started again, and the Neuhaus equipage rolled past them; with immense courtesy the sallow little man saluted the handsome woman beneath her gay parasol. She had the child in her lap, and her grayish-blue eyes met his with a strange expression in them.

"She is still handsome," murmured the Freiin, returning her salutation with a degree of reserve, "and, good heavens! she cannot be very young! Let me see, Palmer; I think it was thirteen years ago that we met her first at Baden-Baden, when I was there with the Dowager Duchess and the Duke,—it was at Countess Schomberg's. And then she came to the capital with her elderly husband; the change of air would do her

good, she said." There was a suspicion of mischief in the old lady's good-humoured smile. "I would not breathe a word against her; it was so short a period of splendour, Palmer; the Duke was married a year afterwards, and since then he has been the most exemplary of husbands."

"Oh, dear madame, his Highness always pursued the path of virtue then, as now; who could doubt it!"

The old lady scanned her companion's smiling face, and her own flushed with irritation. "Have done with your innuendoes, Palmer!" she exclaimed. "I know what you mean; but there never was, and never will be, an atom of truth in it. Claudine Gerold——"

"Ah! who says a word against Claudine von Gerold, the purest of the pure?" he rejoined, lifting his hat above his bald head.

Frau von Katzenstein flushed a deeper crimson, bit her lip, and was silent. This Palmer was an eel, it was impossible to catch him; a Mephistopheles, a Tarruffe. In her indignation she could not find epithets sufficiently strong to bestow upon the favourite, so universally disliked.

"Here we are," he said, waving his gloved hand towards the ruined gables of the convent, in which the tracery of the mullioned window showed like lace upon dark velvet. Above the tower, as it emerged from the depths of shade, Heinemann's doves were flying like flakes of silver, and beneath the spreading beechen boughs gleamed the flowers of the garden.

"Positively, madame," said Herr von Palmer, "it is idyllic, this Owl's Nest; a lovely nook in which to dream of future bliss."

From the platform of the gallery came a burst of laughter, not precisely as melodious as might have been expected from lovely feminine lips, it was perhaps a little too loud, but it was so cordial, so clear, that even the busy writer in the bell-room paused to listen, till a smile chased from his face the expression of annoyance it had worn.

Such a sound! so honest, so frank, so absolutely healthy; it reminded him of a cool mountain-brook bubbling over rocks and stones. A remarkable laugh, and it was Beata's, that 'barbaric creature's.' He shook his head and took up his pen, but the laugh still rang in his ears. Below, in the shadow of the oak, Beata was wiping from her bright eyes tears of merriment.

She was sitting beside Claudine on the bench which Heinemann had skilfully constructed of beech branches, and was giving her young cousin a lesson in the use of the sewing-machine. The little instrument was placed before them on the green-painted garden-table, and the delicate hands of the quondam lady-in-waiting were busied with its complicated mechanism.

"You look so droll, Claudine!" laughed Beata. "My dearest child, your needle came unthreaded long ago, and yet you go on sewing in a perfect frenzy of energy! Look, there it is; now it is right."

Claudine, dressed in the simplest of gowns, was working away, her cheeks crimson with eagerness. "Only have patience with me, Beata; I shall soon learn," said she, examining her seam. "Before long I shall come and help *you* with your sewing."

"Not exactly," Beata rejoined. "What! with all you have to do, come and help me, who have a houseful of servants tripping one another up! If you have a leisure

hour, you should give it to your piano or to your easel. But I have designs upon a certain person,—that Berg. Would you believe it, she never even knits a stocking for the child! And when a few days ago I took her some of our finest homespun yarn and said, ‘Here, my dear, the child must be well provided against next winter; it is cold here in our mountains,’ her very nose grew pale, and she replied that her Grace the Princess Thekla would on no account permit any one to interfere with her grand-daughter’s wardrobe; and, besides, woollen stockings were unhealthy. ‘Indeed?’ said I. ‘Do I look unhealthy? or the child’s father? And we, my dear, never wore anything until we grew up but homespun wool and homespun linen.’ She did not dare to reply, but I wish you could have seen her face. She tried to conceal her vexation, and coldly observed that she had very exact directions from the Princess. Good heavens! why was Lothar so stupid? He is the child’s father. But when I told him about it afterwards, he only shrugged his shoulders, without a word. Just let me have charge of the puny little creature for a month, Claudine, and you will see wonders; it will be as fresh and rosy as your chubby little darling.” She pointed to the child, who was busy with the cups and saucers which Aunt Claudine had produced that morning from her own doll’s cupboard. “Moreover,” Beata continued, “your present fresh, natural mode of life has done you good. Your eyes are so bright, and there is the former bloom on your cheeks, which you quite lost at court. ’Tis fortunate, child, that there is no one here whose head you can turn; you——”

Claudine was bending over the sewing-machine, and smiling as she turned the little wheel. She did not

observe Beata's pause, nor the surprised, half-terrified glance that she cast down the road. Why, good heavens! those were the crimson court-liveries!

"Claudine, Claudine, look!" she exclaimed. "Actually there come the Duke and Duchess!"

Claudine suddenly leaned against the back of the bench upon which she was sitting, and looked as if about to faint, her startled gaze fixed upon the approaching carriages. Heinemann came running up the garden path in his shirt-sleeves, stripping off his apron, probably that he might don his ancient livery; Fräulein Lindenmeyer's window was closed with a rattle, and Beata was about to take flight, when her eyes fell upon Claudine.

"What is the matter?" she whispered, seizing the girl's hand. "Come, we must go and receive them. Or are you ill?"

But Claudine had already recovered herself. She hastened down to the garden, and passed through it with a step as firm as though she had been treading the polished floor at some brilliant court ball, her carriage as gracefully easy as if, instead of her simple gown and black silk apron, she had been attired in the trained robe of light blue velvet in which she had but lately excited such an enthusiasm of admiration. Beata followed her with admiring eyes. How self-possessed was her low courtesy! what grace in the inclination of her fair forehead to receive the Duchess's kiss!

Beata leaned forward to observe the gentlemen. Good heavens! there stood Lothar beside the Duke, and they were all walking towards the house, the Duchess leaning on Claudine's arm. Beata hastily slipped through the glass door into the sitting-room

and thence into Fräulein Lindenmeyer's apartment. The old lady had almost lost her wits from the exciting nature of the occasion. She was standing before the glass, trying to put on a wonderful cap with scarlet ribbons, but her trembling hands refused to put in a pin with any security. Poor old lady! she looked odd enough; she had put on the waist of her best black silk gown, but had forgotten the skirt, which was still hanging in the open wardrobe. She was trembling like an aspen.

"My dear Lindenmeyer, do not be agitated," Beata exclaimed, merrily, "but tell me where the glass dishes are that grandmamma used to have, and where Claudine keeps the silver spoons, and then sit down in your arm-chair by the window; you are sufficiently dressed to do that, and you can watch the grand party in peace as they walk in the garden."

But the old lady had so entirely lost her head that she declared that for the present she could not, to save her life, remember anything. Then Beata laughed, and, closing the door after her, ran up-stairs to the dreamer's room. Of course he had no inkling of the honour shown his household; he heard and saw naught save his own fancies.

Beata shook her head as she paused hesitating at the door of the bell-room. Her face flushed crimson as she lifted the latch in response to the 'come in,' and suddenly her stern face, with its masculine strength, looked sweet and maidenly.

"Joachim, you have visitors," she said. "Put on your best coat and come down; the Duke and Duchess are below." And when he raised his eyes from his work and looked at her, half amazed, half vexed, she laughed the same laugh that had resounded a while before.

"But make haste; their Highnesses will wonder at the absence of the master of the house. I will follow you with some refreshments."

Involuntarily, he ran his hand through his thick brown hair. This was the last thing he had expected in the Owl's Nest,—a visit from their Highnesses! What did they want of an impoverished man? Ah, Claudine!—they wanted Claudine back again!

With a gloomy air he hurried out of the room. Beata lingered a little, looking around her like some shy child when it goes to church for the first time. Then she went on tiptoe to the writing-table, and, with her heart beating fast and her cheeks crimsoned, peeped at the sheet of paper across which lay the pen that had been dropped. In letters of which the ink was scarcely dry she read, 'A Few Thoughts upon Laughter.' She shook her head in some bewilderment, and looked from the manuscript to the open bookcase, smiling again; and this time her smile was one of heartfelt satisfaction, which still illumined her face as she went down to the pantry, where she arranged fresh, fragrant wild strawberries on a salver, and went out on the gallery, followed by old Heinemann, looking odd enough in his antiquated Gerold livery, his countenance composed to an expression of due solemnity. As Beata made her appearance the Duchess was just about to visit the cellar where the wax had been discovered, now indeed more than half emptied of its store.

Beata von Gerold had already been presented to their Highnesses; on the occasion of her brother's marriage with a princess of the reigning family she had spent three of the most uncomfortable days of her life in the capital, had been obliged to pay visits and to receive them, had dined with the Princess Thekla, and

had 'endured,' as she expressed it, a ball at the Castle. She had worn a sky-blue silk gown once, and a lemon-coloured satin once, and had been wretched in each, because the modiste could not be induced to make them loose enough in the waist. And when, on her return to her home, she donned once more her elastic jersey, she had vowed that she would rather break stones on the highway than live at court. Remembering all this, her courtesy on the present occasion was not very profound, and her face wore the expression which Joachim had stigmatized as 'barbaric.'

"Let us go to the wax-cellar, then," said the Duke, carefully wrapping a richly-embroidered shawl about his wife's shoulders. Claudine took a large key from the basket on the table beside the sewing-machine and directed Heinemann to show the way; Joachim escorted their Highnesses, while she herself went into the house to get the lacking plates and spoons and a tablecloth.

She did it with trembling hands and a distressed look upon her face. "Why should it be?" she murmured. "Why should it be, here too?" She leaned her head against the corner of the old oaken press that held her grandmother's store of linen, as if seeking some material support in the tempest that filled her soul. "Be calm!" she whispered, pressing her hand upon her breast, as if to quiet the throbbing of her heart. And she recovered her self-possession; when, a few minutes afterwards, she prepared to follow the party to the cellar, her face was as serene as ever.

"Stay!" said a deep voice from the cellar-vaults; "thus far and no farther. You have no wrap, and it is very cool down here." Baron Lothar was standing below her with his hand extended. "Try to control

your impatience, my fair cousin," he continued, and there was something like contempt in his tone. "I hear their Highnesses returning. Was not that the Duke's voice? or am I mistaken?"

She looked him full in the face with a slight shrug. His tone was so strange, almost menacing.

"We had better await their Highnesses up there," he went on; "here——" He paused, for she had turned and was mounting the steps leading to the hall of the house, whence she went, without turning to look back, out on the gallery. He followed her, and stood leaning against the frame of the glass door, observing the simply-spread table. There was nothing to recall an ancient, wealthy race,—the dishes were of plain glass and the spoons were thin and worn. The silver-plate of the family was in his cupboards. The damask linen table-cloth alone showed the Gerold scutcheon in its four corners, a masterpiece of the weaver's art. It had been brought hither by the old widow in memory of the first day when it had been used,—the day when her infant son was christened.

"Our arms," he said, indicating the leaping stag with a star between its horns, that stood out like satin on the fabric. "It has been stainless, this scutcheon of ours, for centuries; not once has the splendour of that star been dimmed. The race has had misfortunes, has succumbed to destiny, but its honour has been preserved untarnished, by its men and its women, until to-day——"

The girl whom he confronted shrank as from the sting of an adder, and a piteous glance from her blue eyes appealed to him; but her words died upon her lips, for at that moment their Highnesses appeared, and Lothar hastened to meet them. The Duke, walk-

ing with Joachim, followed his wife, who was leaning upon the old Freiin's arm. Behind them came a very ill-assorted pair, Beata with Palmer, who was a head shorter than his companion. She was listening with a smile of contempt to his chatter, and when the party sat down she took a chair as far from him as possible.

"And that large cellar was quite full?" the Duchess asked, as she took her place; and then, without waiting for an answer, she ran on, "Oh, wild strawberries! how I love them! They certainly are a thousand times more fragrant than those grown in our gardens and hot-houses.—Do you know, Adalbert," and she turned to the Duke, who was still standing talking with Joachim, "that I should so like to go strawberrying with the children in the forest! we might have a charming picnic.—Herr von Palmer, pray have one arranged somewhere where the berries are thickest, and let it be soon, soon; we must make the most of our time in this lovely place."

They all sat down round the table, and Claudine handed about the bowl of fruit. When she offered it to the Duke, he simply refused with a wave of his hand to take any, and, without looking at her, went on attending to what Joachim was saying. She then approached the Neuhauser; he, too, refused. Upon which she also took her place at the table, and sat quietly looking down at little Elizabeth, who had slipped to her side and stood leaning against her lap. She was roused from her reverie by the voice of the Duchess:

"My dear Fräulein von Gerold, you must come often to Altenstein; we, my husband and I, have determined to lay aside all etiquette and formality while we are here, and be only good neighbours, visiting one

another frequently. We are going to drop in upon the Neuhausers, too.—Yes, yes, Fräulein von Gerold,” she said to Beata, “I must have a glimpse of your wonderfully-ordered establishment, and I hope to see you soon at Altenstein.”

“Your Highness will confer great honour upon our house by your presence there, but you must be graciously pleased to excuse me,” Beata dryly replied. “My domestic duties do not allow me to leave home often or for long; its welfare is intrusted to me, and I occupy the post of housekeeper for my brother. One must be doubly careful, your Highness, in administering the affairs of others.”

The Duchess looked surprised for a moment by the speaker's frankness, and then, with a gracious smile, observed, “The Gerolds were always loyal to duty; I must bear my disappointment. But you, Fräulein Claudine von Gerold, you? We reckon certainly upon you.—Do we not, Adalbert?”

“Beg pardon. What did you say? I was not listening, Liesel.”

“You must ratify what I say,” she went on, kindly. “We depend upon mamma's favourite while we are at Altenstein, and we wish to have Fräulein Claudine von Gerold with us often, do we not?”

For a moment there was silence beneath the oak; the setting sun gilded each leaf and sent quivering rays and gleams of light to dart among its branches; its glow seemed to be reflected in Claudine's face, and then she grew very pale.

“It is certainly true, Fräulein von Gerold,”—and the tone of the voice that fell on her ear was so calm and indifferent that the turmoil in her soul was suddenly soothed,—“it is certainly true that the Duchess has

been looking forward to practising with you at Altenstein." And then, turning again to Joachim, he asked, "How did it end? Did the man die of the wound, or——"

"He is still living, your Highness, and is as much of a poacher as ever."

Everybody knew that when once the Duke began to discuss hunting and kindred subjects he was lost to everything else. Palmer alone smiled incredulously, and watched Claudine, whose bosom felt lightened of a load.

"As your Highness pleases," she said, gently; "but I have not sung a note for a long while; my time is too much occupied."

The Duchess coughed slightly; the first cool breeze of evening began to play among the trees, and the invalid's pale cheeks flushed feverishly.

The Duke started. "It is time to go," he said. "Order the carriages."

The footman, who had been standing motionless at the garden gate, beckoned to the carriages passing slowly to and fro, and in a very short time the distinguished guests had taken their places in them and were driving towards home.

"It is time we were thinking of going, too, Lothar," Beata said to her brother. He nodded assent, and shook Joachim's hand, but when he turned to take leave of Claudine, she had vanished.

Beata, going to get her hat and sunshade, found her in the kitchen, busy preparing a saucer of strawberries, as she said, for Fräulein Lindenmeyer.

"Where have you hidden yourself? We must go, Claudine," Beata began, pulling on her spun-silk gloves. "This has been a very exciting day. I congratulate

you on your sociable neighbours; they may prove very agreeable. Always keep something in the house,—a couple of cakes or so. Her Highness von Altenstein will come often; she enjoys her rôle, as did Queen Louise at Paretz. Ah, Claudine, I believe it is the very anguish of death that drives that poor creature from one thing to another so restlessly; did you observe that she could scarcely breathe? But I must go. That fat Berg will be hungry, and they cannot get into the pantry; I saw to that. Good-by, Claudine; come soon, and bring the child with you." She pressed Claudine's hand and hurried out.

Claudine carried the strawberries to Fräulein Lindenmeyer, whom she found still sitting in her petticoat and the cap with red ribbons; little Elizabeth was in her lap, listening to a lovely story about a wondrously beautiful girl who married a prince.

"A duke," the child corrected her; and then, perceiving Claudine, she asked, "May I stay here awhile, aunt?"

But her aunt did not hear; she was listening to the rumbling of carriage-wheels dying away on the forest road.

"Oh, heavens, Fräulein Claudine!" exclaimed Fräulein Lindenmeyer, delighted to be able at last to discuss the great event, and letting the child slip down from her lap as she arose, "what a handsome man our gracious Duke is! Every inch a duke! As he walked through the garden beside Herr Joachim I could not help thinking of what Schiller says:

'So grand his port; his falcon glance.'

Ah, Fräulein Claudine, if your grandmother could only have lived to see you all sitting in the gallery and

eating strawberries together like one family! Ah, dear Fräulein Claudine!"

"Aunt Claudine, I like Cousin Lothar better," said the child. "Cousin Lothar has nicer eyes."

The young lady suddenly turned and walked towards the door without a word. She mounted the narrow staircase and tapped at Joachim's door. Entering, she found him pacing the room to and fro with an utterly bewildered expression of countenance. "My ideas are in sad confusion," he complained. "Alas for my delicious solitude! Claudine, do not misunderstand me. You know how I love and honour our reigning family, how proud I am that my beautiful sister should attract them to our forest nook. But, Claudine—— Are you vexed that I say this?" suddenly aware of the shadow upon her brow.

She shook her head. "No, Joachim; why should I be? But I am sorry for you, and we will frankly tell the Duke and Duchess that nothing, absolutely nothing, must disturb you at your work."

He paused before her and patted her cheek. "No, my child," he rejoined; "as a former lady-in-waiting, you must know that such a course would be impossible. It was amiability itself in their Highnesses to pay us a visit. Such a repulse as Beata gave them in her blunt fashion they must not meet with from us. That Beata," he went on, "fairly took my breath away when she blurted out her reply. I cannot understand how Lothar could listen so composedly; it shocked me intensely."

"But your work, Joachim,—you may be sure that the Duchess would be inconsolable if she thought she had interrupted you."

"She is a lovely creature, Claudine, an enthusiast

for all that is beautiful, and she is ill, very ill. Did you hear her cough? It cut me to the heart. It was precisely like *her* cough, Claudine! Oh, this cruel disease! No, no, Claudine; if only for the sake of that fading life, let them always be welcome to the Owl's Nest."

His sister made no reply. She had gone to the bow-window, through which the crimson glow of evening shone into the room, and was looking, with distress in her eyes, far away beyond the tree-tops. No, she could not, she must not, burden him with fresh care; she must not disturb him; and perhaps it no longer existed,—that blind, unreasoning passion. Not one ardent look had she encountered this afternoon; he had scarcely glanced towards her. She nodded her head mechanically, as if controverting an inward conviction. Yes, perhaps his courtesy, his magnanimity, his chivalry, had been victorious, and the sight of that fading life—— She might be reassured, she might hope.

Her brother approached her and took her hand. "Does the solitude here make you melancholy, Claudine?" he asked, tenderly. "To-day, when our house was illuminated by a gleam from your past life, everything here seemed unspeakably poor and mean; it occurred to me that it was a sin to fetter you thus, you royal swan."

"Joachim," she exclaimed, laughing, although there were tears in her eyes, "if you only knew how I like to be here, how dear and home-like all this poverty seems to me, you would not talk so. No, I am not sad; I am really happier than I have been for a long time. And now I must go down and attend to our supper; there is very little, to be sure, besides lettuce and eggs, but you have no idea, Joachim, how tender and crisp Heinemann's lettuce is."

She presented her cheek for his kiss and went, giving him a little nod as she stood in the door-way. And the tap of the heels of her slippers on the stairs, and the fresh melody of her voice, resounded cheerfully in the ears of the solitary man, standing where she had stood at the window. If only the melancholy in her eyes had not contradicted it all!

A few hours later the Owl's Nest was as calm and quiet as if the forest had sung it to sleep with its rustling; only in Claudine's chamber a light was still shining. Its owner was seated at the old-fashioned writing-table, which managed to maintain its equilibrium upon ridiculously thin legs, and which had once formed part of the furniture of her grandmother's maiden chamber far away in Southern Prussia. She had opened several drawers, and was rummaging among letters and pressed flowers and all kinds of boxes. Yes, the lovely, haughty lady-in-waiting, with all her self-possession, was only a girl, a genuine girl, with a heart that fluttered amid secret hopes and fears, else why should she press to her lips, as she did, while her eyes filled with tears, a little slip of paper on which a few notes of music were written?—only a couple of lines of written music, and the words, 'Wouldst thou but be mine own, love, none should our secret know.' She had once been asked by her dear old Princess to sing it, and the notes were not to be found; one of those present had gone to a writing-table and had jotted down the lovely air from memory, and then she had sung the song. She knew she had sung well that evening. And when she had finished, one pair of eyes had paid her the homage of unconcealed admiration, but only that once,—never again! It had lasted but a second,—that look which met hers,—and then his gaze had rested upon the

Princess Katharina, beside whose chair he stood, a courteous cavalier, always obedient, in a sort of smiling indifference, to his lady's whim. And the bold black eyes of the young Princess had gazed up into his face, as if repeating the words, 'Wouldst thou but be mine own!'

That evening must have faded from his memory, or he would not have spoken so irritably a while ago of his love for music; but she had never been able to forget it. It was then that another pair of eyes had first sought her own with so ardent an expression that she had been terrified indeed.

'Wouldst thou but be mine own!'

She sprang up and walked from the writing-table to the window and back again in extreme agitation. Her eyes wandered about the room as if seeking help, and as she paused before the writing-table she looked down at a small pastel picture of a lovely female face, the richly-carved frame that enclosed it surmounted by a stag's head, between the branching horns of which shone a star, that gleamed in the dim candle-light with a metallic lustre. An expression of supreme melancholy appeared on the girl's face. "Ah, mother," she whispered, "if you were but living, and I could tell you all!"

She stood before the picture with hands folded as in prayer.

The next day at noon heavy clouds came up from behind the mountains and emptied themselves in the Paulinenthal. Old Heinemann, with many a sigh, watched the tempest beating down his flowers, and the

water loosening the tender roots of his freshly-planted vegetables and nearly sweeping them away.

"Oh, heavens!" he wailed in the kitchen, where he was 'washing up' like a regular scullery-maid. "Only look, Fräulein Claudine; this is a perfect storm!" He pointed through the window to the fir-clad mountains, where thin columns of mist could be seen rising here and there. "The Stag is smoking his pipe; you may rely upon it, the rain will last for three days, if it only stops then! It's just pouring over there, and very gloomy down here."

And so it was; a genuine mountain-rain set in; the water dripped and trickled on the steep roads; the little brook among the hemlocks was muddy and swollen, and all the flowers hung their heads.

The child stood with her doll at the window of Fräulein Lindenmeyer's room, flattening her nose against the panes, and asking when it would be done raining, that she might run out in the garden. And the old lady sat busily knitting, and turning her head now and then, from habit, to observe the passers-by, but in vain. Only the lame errand-woman, dripping wet, drove her skinny horse past the gate, her petticoat thrown over her head, and her horse covered with oil-cloth, while the water poured out of the back of her wagon.

Claudine was pursuing her studies upon the sewing-machine in the sitting-room, her cheeks flushed with pride in her first faultless seam. Yes, labour—even despised, mechanical, feminine labour—is a blessing; it serves to beguile many an hour of sorrow. Joachim was buried in his books. It was the very weather for work, he said at table, and as soon as dinner was over he returned to his manuscript and was oblivious to all else.

The next day it still rained steadily, and on the next still harder. In the Altenstein manor-house there was little more cheer than was to be found outside. The Duchess was weary and out of sorts, and coughed continually; the gloomy weather suggested sad thoughts of the future. She tried to be cheerful, and wrote a letter to her sister; but tears had suddenly fallen upon the paper, and she could not add to the grief of the young widow by any hint that she was worse than usual. Then she went down into the spacious central hall, where her two eldest sons were having a fencing-lesson; for a moment or two the gallant bearing of her handsome, fair-haired darlings filled her with delight, but the old feeling of weakness suddenly overcame her, and Frau von Katzenstein had to conduct her back to her couch. After a while she had her youngest boy brought to her,—the child whose coming into the world had so exhausted her failing vitality,—a splendid rosy fellow, glowing with health, and she gazed with ecstasy into his laughing blue eyes. How like he was to his father, the husband whom she so worshipped! And suddenly she arose, with the boy in her arms, and walked towards the door of her room.

Frau von Katzenstein and the maid rushed towards her to take the little Prince from her, but she refused, smiling, to give up the boy, saying, "No, please; I want to surprise the Duke." And she went on tiptoe across the polished floor of the drawing-room that separated his apartments from hers, and paused, panting, before the door of his room.

It was delightful here in Altenstein to have him so near,—to be able to run to him, like any other happy wife, carrying her child to its father. She took the boy's little hand and made it knock at the door.

"Papa!" she cried; "dear papa, let us in; it is we,—Liesel and Adi!"

Within, a drawer was closed, and immediately afterwards the door opened; the Duke, in a black velvet morning-coat, appeared on the threshold, evidently surprised by this visit. Palmer was standing by the writing-table, his hand full of papers, and several sheets were spread out upon the table.

"Oh, I am interrupting you, Adalbert," the young wife said, coughing. The chamber was filled with smoke from Turkish cigarettes.

"Can I do anything for you, Liesel?" he asked. "Excuse this smoke, it makes you cough; you know I am addicted to smoking when I am at work. Come, let me take you to your rooms; this is no place for you."

She slowly shook her head. "I wanted nothing." And, with a glance towards Palmer, she suppressed the words, "I only wanted to see you, to bring the child to you."

"Nothing?" he repeated, with a slightly impatient emphasis, as he took the child from her. "But come, you must not stay here."

A few minutes afterwards she was sitting again in her easy-chair, alone. He had work to do: he was discussing the building of a new Academy to be founded at Neurode,—a very important matter. When she had asked, "Will you not take five o'clock tea with me, Adalbert?" he had replied, absently, "Perhaps, my love, if I have time; but do not wait for me."

Five o'clock struck, and she waited, when suddenly the noise of carriage-wheels sounded beneath her window. It was the Duke; he was driving out, and in such weather! Oh, yes, she had forgotten; he had spoken

yesterday of driving over to Oakshade, the ancient ducal hunting-lodge, which was to be restored. She leaned back sadly among her cushions. How desolate these strange rooms were, with the rain beating against the windows, and so lonely! The child was in his nursery again; the Duke did not like to have her keep him long with her, because his joyous restlessness fatigued her. The physician daily enjoined it upon her to avoid exertion,—a hard rule for a mother. Frau von Katzenstein, to be sure, sat in the anteroom, sleeping or reading, but there might as well have been no one there; the kind old lady did not understand her; she cared only for the bodily weal of her ‘sweetest Highness,’ and so did her lady’s-maid; but ah, this loneliness! She picked up the book that she had dropped; her eyes ached, she could not read any more. It was a terrible story; one knew beforehand that the heroine would end in suicide; it was the fashion nowadays. And when one is sad to begin with, and the rain is pouring outside as if it never were going to stop, it is hardly worth while to read what will make one yet sadder. If there were only a single soul to talk to, as she used to talk to her sister at home! Ah, yes, that would make it home-like here, with a bright fire on the hearth in the twilight and the rain pouring outside.

And all at once she saw with her mind’s eye Claudine von Gerold, in her simple gown, her basket of keys on her arm, presiding with such grace over her brother’s poor household; how serene she seemed, how happy, and how fitted to bestow happiness! Claudine had always contrasted so finely with the other ladies-in-waiting; not for worlds would her Highness have had with her here in Altenstein the little Countess H., with

her soubrette face and wayward disposition, or Fräulein von X., who scarcely ever really opened her eyes, and who never smiled; she never had the least desire to see anything more of them. But Claudine,—Claudine von Gerold! And suddenly she felt a positive longing for the gentle girl with the earnest blue eyes. She pressed the button of the silver bell on the table beside her, and then wrote a few hurried lines at her writing-table.

“Take this letter to Fräulein von Gerold. Let a carriage be sent for her. Make haste!”

A feverish restlessness possessed her. In an hour she might be here. She ordered a fire made on the hearth, and had the tea-table arranged near it.

Then she wandered to and fro in the room, now and then going to the window and looking out into the rain. An hour passed, and she did not come. But hark! a carriage! She left the window, her heart beating like that of a young girl awaiting her lover, and she laughed at herself. “Christine would call me ‘fanatical’ again,” she said to herself, thinking of her sister,—when, to her surprise, Baron Gerold was announced ‘by appointment with her Highness.’ She had quite forgotten it. To-day? Yes, it must be so! True, she had begged him to come and give her some information with regard to the reported poverty in Walderode, the village in the vicinity.

She was delighted to see him, and made minute inquiries of him, but between-whiles she listened eagerly. “I seem absent, Baron; I am expecting a visitor,” she said, laughing, when suddenly, in the midst of an explanation as to the structure of an almshouse, she turned to the window. “Guess whom! But no, do not guess, and then you will have a surprise. Then, my

dear Gerold, if you undertake to build this house, you may rely upon my help."

"Your Highness is, as ever, kindness itself," said Lothar, rising.

"His Highness," Frau von Katzenstein suddenly announced, and immediately afterwards the Duke entered.

"Oh, how pleasant, Liesel!" he said, gayly, kissing the delicate hand held out to him. "And you, dear Baron, do you know I was just sending my huntsman for you? I thought of having a game of ombre this evening. It is just the weather for ombre, eh?"

"I am at your Highness's commands."

The Duke smothered a yawn and sat down near the fire; old Frau von Katzenstein was busy at a side-table making the tea; a lackey went noiselessly to and fro in the room, and finally stood like a shadow at the door, awaiting the moment when he should hand about the cups. The twilight had gathered quickly; it was difficult to distinguish the faces of those present; now and then a flame would flicker forth in the chimney and cast a momentary light upon the Duke. He looked weary, and his large, white hand continually stroked his fair, full beard.

"It is very lonely here on such days as this," he began at last. "We positively met no one on the road, my dear Gerold, except your lady sister. She was walking with great determination along the wet, deserted high-road in a waterproof and with an umbrella, apparently as content as if it were a delicious May morning. She was probably going to the Owl's Nest, for she turned to the right."

"Very likely, your Highness; she is not easily prevented by the weather from paying her cousin a visit."

The Duke took one of the cups, which were all decorated with his scutcheon. "She is to be envied," he said in an undertone, putting a huge lump of sugar into the steaming tea.

"For her health, your Highness thinks? It is a fact that none of the Gerolds know what nerves are; they have, to quote your Highness's favourite author, 'nerves of steel and bones of ivory.'"

"Of course that is what I meant." Then, hastily draining his cup, he asked, "Is it your fashion now to sit in the dark, Liesel? You used to like light above all things."

"Fräulein Claudine von Gerold!" the old Frau von Katzenstein suddenly announced.

The rustle of a silk dress was audible, and a rich, feminine voice spoke: "I am here, your Highness."

"Ah, my dear Claudine!" exclaimed the Duchess, motioning her to a chair: "I trust my impatient summons did not inconvenience you."

At that moment the lights in the hanging-lamps flamed up more clearly and revealed the crimson-hung apartment, casting a mild white light upon the little group of people around the hearth.

The Duke, as well as Baron Gerold, had risen, and both were looking at the beautiful girl with the same expression of surprise. There was a sudden light in the Duke's eyes, which, however, instantly gave place to the old expression of apathy. A frown gathered upon the Baron's brow, but that vanished also immediately. And there beside the Duchess's sofa she stood, her simple black silk gown showing her magnificent figure to the best advantage. There was scarcely a trace of colour in her face, and, after a low courtesy to his Highness, she stood looking down at the Duchess,

who motioned her again to the chair that had been placed for her, and asking if she were well,—she looked so pale,—begged her to take a glass of wine after her cool drive.

The Duke did not sit down again; he leaned upon the mantel-piece, watching with great apparent interest the proceedings of the old Freiin, who had just approached her royal mistress with a basket of gay worsted, but who withdrew at a gesture from the Duchess, who was speaking. He took no part in the conversation, in which the Duchess included Lothar, whose remarks, however, sounded constrained.

"I suspect our ombre table is ready for us," the Duke said suddenly, and, with a light kiss upon his wife's forehead and a slight bow to Claudine, he left the room, followed by Lothar.

"Dearest Katzenstein," said the Duchess, "I know you want to write letters; do not let me detain you. You see I have the best of society. Draw the curtains, have the tea-table removed and my lounge placed near the fire, which feels comfortable, although it is the 6th of June by the almanac. And, dear Katzenstein, have lamps put on the piano.—You will sing a little?" she asked, turning to Claudine.

"If your Highness commands——"

"No, I beg. But let us have a chat first."

The eager young creature lying upon the lounge exerted all her charm to induce her silent companion to join her in this 'chat,' but the girl was as if under a spell. It seemed to her that she should stifle in this artificially heated apartment, where from every corner, every bit of carving, old memories floated towards her. Here, in this very room, she and Joachim had always, as children, had their Christmas-presents; here the

pretty ball had been given in honour of her eighteenth birthday; here, weeping and in deep mourning, she had received her brother upon his return home with his young wife, while their father's body lay on its bier in the room below. Then the bow-window had been turned into a garden; seats had been placed there among blooming pomegranates, that the northern climate might not depress the young wife; the scarlet blossoms, Claudine had thought, would be like a greeting to her from her distant fatherland, but they had sufficed only to fill her young sister-in-law's eyes with tears. "Oh, how small these blossoms are! how sickly they look!" she had wailed. Ah, it had been a hard time!

Claudine came back to the present as if from a dream, roused by the voice of the Duchess, and the young girl's look was so sad and tearful that her Highness ceased speaking and timidly clasped her friend's hand in her own.

"Ah, I forgot how sad it must make you to see strange people in your old home!"

It sounded so kind, so gentle, and the clasp of the hot, little hand was so sincere, that Claudine turned her head aside to conceal the tears that veiled her eyes.

"Cry, dear; it will relieve you," the Duchess said simply.

Claudine shook her head, and did her best to regain her composure, but without success. What a medley of emotions surged up within her! and then this woman's tenderness!

"Pardon me, your Highness, pardon me," she said at last, "and permit me to withdraw. I am conscious that I cannot to-day be the companion whom your Highness——"

"No, no, my dear Claudine! I cannot let you go! Do you imagine I do not understand you? My dear child, I too have been crying to-day." And the tears flowed fast again over her fever-flushed cheeks. "I have had a sad day to-day," she went on. "I feel so ill that I cannot but think continually of dying; I cannot help dwelling upon the terrible family vault beneath the chapel of the castle in the capital; and then I think of my children, and of the Duke. Why should one so young and so happy as I am have such thoughts? Just look at me, dearest Claudine; I am perfectly happy but for my illness. I have a husband to whom I am dear beyond measure, and such lovely children, and yet all these frightful thoughts will not leave me. I am so oppressed for breath to-day."

"It is the close atmosphere, your Highness," said the young girl, deeply moved.

"Yes, of course. I am nervous; it will pass away, I know. I feel better since you came. Come as often as you can. I will confess to you, dear Claudine,—mamma knows my secret,—that since seeing you I have been longing to have you always about me. But mamma was so charmed with you that she would not hear of giving you up. I cannot blame her. The Duke himself begged for me, but she refused point-blank."

Claudine did not stir; her eyes were downcast, and for an instant her cheek crimsoned.

"It was strange; dear mamma never before refused me anything. And now, dear Claudine, comes my request. Stay with me, at least, while we are here."

"Impossible, your Highness!" Claudine said almost bluntly; and then in a tone of entreaty she added, "My brother, your Highness, and his child!"

"Oh, I take all that into consideration; but you

must contrive to give me a couple of hours every day, Claudine,—only a couple of hours! Give me your hand upon it. Only one or two songs now and then. You cannot think how your singing soothes me!”

The poor woman leaned her feverish face forward close to Claudine's, and the unnaturally brilliant eyes looked beseechingly into the young girl's own. How touching was the evidence in that face of the fading life! Why should she so entreat?—and for what? If she could dream—but no, she must not!

“Your Highness——” Claudine stammered.

“No, no, I will not be put off so. I long for a friend, and I could not find one nobler, better, or truer than you, Claudine. Why do you let me entreat you so?”

“Your Highness——” the girl repeated, overcome, and bowing over the hand that clasped her own. But the Duchess lifted up her face and kissed her brow.

“My dear friend!” she said.

“Your Highness! for the love of heaven!” Claudine whispered. But the Duchess did not hear her: she had turned her head towards her old lady-in-waiting, who announced in an undertone that the Duke would sup with the gentlemen in the room next the card-room, and asked where her Highness would take her supper.

“Up here in the little drawing-room,” the Duchess gave orders, with a glance of disappointment towards Claudine. “I had so looked forward to this evening. We should have been such a pleasant *partie carrée*, the Duke, your cousin, and we two.” And she added, as in jest, “Yes, yes, my dear Claudine, we poor wives must share our husbands' hearts with various other passions. The chase and ombre have cost me many

a tear; but happy is the wife who has nothing graver to cause them."

It was nine o'clock before Claudine was permitted to return home. As she descended the broad, familiar staircase, attended by the Duchess's maid, a lackey passed her with a couple of silver champagne-coolers. She knew that his Highness was fond of cards, with an accompaniment of Heidsieck and cigarettes, and that he sometimes sat at the card-table until dawn. Thank heaven that he was so occupied this evening! Her light foot-fall was inaudible on the crimson-carpeted staircase. At the hall door stood her father's old servant, Friedrich Kern, now in the ducal livery, his honest face beaming with delight. She nodded to him kindly, and hurried out. With a sigh of relief she sank back among the silken cushions of the carriage; she had been as frightened as a child lest some one might meet her in the corridor,—some one! No, thank God! she was alone in the ducal vehicle, which was bearing her swiftly towards her home, her own dear home! Never before had she so yearned for the simple little rooms. For a while she resigned herself to such reflections; then suddenly she opened the window and passed her hand across her forehead; the perfume that lingered in the cushions of the carriage aroused painful memories. It was the Duke's favourite perfume; the sweet, heavy fragrance hung around his clothes, enveloping him as in a cloud. It had often made her dizzy when waltzing with his Highness at balls. Nothing else in the world brings back the past so vividly as an odour.

She opened the other window, and sat in the draught caused by the rapid driving, her lips compressed and her eyes shining through tears. In spite of herself,

she had been compelled to cross that threshold. What had her flight availed her? Nothing!—nothing at all! Would he make good his declaration that he should find her out everywhere?

Her thoughts grew confused and contradictory; she seemed to herself untrue, degraded. Ought she not to have repelled the Duchess's advance as bluntly as Beata had done? Ah, Beata! How steadfast and true was her walk through life! At that moment the lights in the windows of the Neuhaus mansion shimmered through the linden boughs; a sudden yearning for her simple, upright cousin possessed her; she longed for a word from her, to learn from a glance from those clear eyes whether she had done wrong. She pulled the silken cord that passed around the coachman's arm, and ordered him to drive to Neuhaus.

Beata was just passing through the spacious hall, her bunch of jingling keys in her hand, and followed by a girl carrying a bolt of linen fresh from the loom.

"What! is it you?" she called in her loud voice that re-echoed from the walls of the hall. "Heavens and earth! where have you come from this evening?"

Claudine stood beneath the waving hanging-lamp, her face looking white as marble from out the black lace which she had tied around it. "I wanted to say good-night to you in passing," she said.

"Come in, then. Where have you been? At Altenstein, I suspect, from your dress. I intended to pay you a visit to-day, but when I had nearly reached your house I met Berg with the child; and guess who was in the carriage with her? Herr von Palmer! It excited my curiosity, so I beckoned to the coachman, and begged permission to make use of our carriage in the threatening weather. Of course the pair were de-

lighted, apparently. Mark what I say, Claudine, I don't know much about love-affairs, they're not at all in my line, but I'll stake my life that will be a match."

Talking thus, she had conducted her cousin into the study, and seated her in one of the brown-covered arm-chairs. "But tell me," she went on from her work-table at the other end of the room, where she was looking for scissors, needle, and thread, "have you been at Altenstein? And is that the ducal carriage outside? Yes? Then, my dear child, we will send it away. Our Lorenz will be delighted to drive you home." She glanced at the clock on the wall above the sofa, between the portraits of her parents. "Five minutes of half-past nine; you can surely stay until ten." And in an instant she had pulled the bell beside the door, and given her orders to the maid-servant who appeared.

"Did you not see Lothar?" she asked. "The Duke's huntsman was here to summon him to Altenstein. They sent for you, too?"

Claudine nodded.

"Your expression of countenance is very edifying, my dear," said Beata, laughing, as she seated herself at her sewing.

"I am not very well; I would rather have stayed at home."

"Why did you not say so frankly?"

Claudine blushed. "I thought I ought not to; the Duchess wrote so kindly."

"You are right, my dear Claudine; you could hardly have refused," Beata rejoined, waxing the thread with which she was sewing on a loop which had been torn off a coarse kitchen towel. "They have always been so kind to you, and the little Duchess, in spite of her sentimentality, is a true-hearted woman,—and so ill.

It really would be disobliging if you refused to make some slight sacrifice for her sake. If you are afraid lest your household should suffer from your absence now and then, I can assure you, my child, that I will see to all that."

As she finished she rose and went to her work-table again, as if she did not wish to look at Claudine.

"You are so kind," the girl murmured. Even the pretext that her home duties might have afforded was taken from her. Everything seemed to combine against her.

"But you have not told me yet whether Lothar was in Altenstein," Beata asked, resuming her seat.

"Yes; he is playing ombre with his Highness."

"Oh, gracious, they'll play forever! Who made up the game?"

"Probably the adjutant or the chamberlain and—some one else,—Palmer, perhaps."

"Oh—he! of course! He said he was in a hurry when he took leave of me in the carriage. I offered to drive to Altenstein, but he thanked me and declined; said he had only been picked up as he was taking a walk,—in this rain, Claudine. He preferred walking. I said, 'Very well,' and let him go; but I was amused at the worthy Berg's expression of countenance when I dropped from the skies into the carriage; the milk-bottle that she held might have been a bowl of hemlock. The nurse told me afterwards that they often met Herr Palmer 'by accident' in their drives, and that then he and Frau Berg spoke 'Italian,'—she meant French,—which she could not understand. But, good heavens, there comes Lothar! See the dog."

The beautiful spaniel had risen, and was standing, wagging his tail, at the door of the room. There was

a light, elastic step outside, and presently the Baron entered. He looked amazed for an instant upon seeing Claudine, who had risen to her feet and was tying her black lace veil over her head.

"Ah, my gracious cousin," he said, bowing. "And I thought you still at Altenstein. His Highness broke up the card-party so suddenly that I supposed you were going to spend a social evening with the Duchess. His Highness had very bad luck at cards to-night," he went on; "but he apparently took it as a good sign; he is superstitious, like all great intellects. At all events, he called me 'cousin' to-night with extreme urbanity, and he never does so unless the barometer stands very high."

As he spoke he laid aside his hat and was taking off his gloves. "Give me a drink of cool, honest beer, sister," he said, changing his tone. "I detest sweet French champagne and those strong cigarettes. But are you going already, cousin?"

"Stay awhile," said Beata; and then turning to Lothar, she added, "She is not very well, but since the Duchess sent her carriage for her, she could not help driving over."

Herr von Gerold smiled, and took the foaming glass which a servant had brought. "Of course not," he said, and drank.

Claudine, who had been standing putting on her wrap, saw his smile, and turned very pale. She walked haughtily towards him. "Of course not," she repeated, and her lip quivered. "I could not but obey her Highness's summons. I went to her to-day, and I shall go again to-morrow, and the day after to-morrow, and every day when she summons me to her presence. I know I act as Joachim would approve, in helping an

invalid to forget her sufferings for an hour, whether she be a duchess or the poor woman who does day-labourer's service in our garden."

She paused, but she looked as if she were putting a restraint upon herself not to proceed.

"Pray order the carriage, Beata," she said; "it is high time I were at home."

The smile had vanished from the Baron's face for a moment, but it hovered upon his lips again as he bowed low in assent. "Permit me to accompany you," he said, taking up his hat.

"Thank you, I had rather be alone."

"I regret that you should be forced to endure my society for a quarter of an hour longer, but I cannot allow you to drive alone."

She threw her arm round Beata and kissed her.

"What is the matter?" the latter asked. "You are trembling."

"Oh, nothing, Beata."

"You must let me know when you are called away from home, Claudine, and I will come and get the child."

Again she was driving through the silent forest. She leaned back in the corner of the carriage, her skirts gathered close about her and her hand firmly grasping their folds, as if it soothed her in her indignation to crush something together. Beside her sat Lothar; a ray from the carriage-lantern fell upon his hand, on which glistened the broad, gold marriage circlet; the hand lay motionless, as if its owner were sleeping. Not a word was spoken in the comfortable silken-cushioned little room which sheltered two people from the rain and all terrors of the night. A tempest of indignation and distress was raging in the girl's

heart. What did this man think of her? what was she in his eyes?

She could not pursue the train of thought; her own words dismayed her: 'And I shall go again to-morrow, and the day after to-morrow, and every day.'

The die was cast; she would do as she had said, and what she did was right.

She leaned forward. Thank heaven! there gleamed the light from Joachim's window. The carriage stopped, and the door was opened. Baron Gerold sprang out and offered her his hand to assist her to alight. She made as though she did not perceive it, and passed through the gate with a haughty inclination of her head. As she glanced towards him she thought she saw by the light of the lantern, held high by old Heinemann, that he was looking after her with an anxious expression. Pshaw! Lothar anxious, and anxious about her!

She reached the house breathless, hearing behind her the rolling of the wheels that bore him back to Neuhaus.

"They are all asleep," whispered the old man, as he lighted his mistress up the steps; "the master only is still at work. The little one played in Fräulein Lindenmeyer's room, and then we had strawberries and milk, and everything went on delightfully."

She nodded to him with a pale, serious face, and closed the door of her little room behind her. Then she threw herself into a chair, clasped her hands over her eyes, and sat for a long time lost in thought. "He is no better than the rest," she said to herself at last, as she began to make ready to go to bed; "even he no longer believes in feminine purity, in feminine honour!"

What had her flight availed her? Did not *he*—he, of all men—believe the worst of her? His smile, his words, this very evening, would have convinced her

of it, even had she not long known it. Oh, the whole world might think of her what it chose, if only her heart, her conscience, acquitted her. She would see to it that she had no cause for hanging her head.

She compressed her lips. Yes, she would show him that a Gerold could walk along the dimmest, muddiest paths without even soiling the sole of her shoe. She looked towards where she knew the star shone between the stag's horns; its lustre should never be dimmed on her account.

She rose, lit a candle, and looked around her. What a sight! Everywhere in the apartment, usually so neat and pretty, were visible the traces of her disordered thoughts: the wardrobe door was wide open, on the dressing-table lay sashes, gloves, pins, combs, all in confusion; various gowns encumbered the bed and the chairs; everything mirrored the period of indecision through which she had passed before she drove to Altenstein. She had taken the articles from drawers and closets aimlessly, and had then dropped them here and there. She would not—no, she would not go, and yet she had not the courage to excuse herself by a falsehood. Outside, the ducal horses had stamped impatiently; one quarter of an hour after another had passed, until at last Joachim had appeared: "But, sister, are you not ready yet?"

Then she went.

She began to restore order to her room, and gave a sigh of relief when it again reigned around her. Yes, everything was settled now. She herself had decided in a moment of anger, of bitter anguish. But had she decided rightly?

Frau von Berg was seated at her writing-table in her room at Neuhaus. The door leading into the adjoining apartment was open; it was occupied by the child with her nurse. The rain was dropping outside and weighing down the wet linden boughs; the lady was writing, wrapped in a thick woollen shawl. She must have been somewhat agitated in mind, for her pen flew over the thick, cream-laid paper, and the letters were excessively small and flowing,—a peculiar handwriting, reminding one of delicate little cat's-paws.

The writer was in an extremely bad humour, and when Beata's loud voice was heard from the hall below she clinched her hand and glanced angrily towards the door. Who could guard against that domestic dragon's insisting, by virtue of her office, upon coming in here to see that everything was in order?—just as yesterday, by virtue of her authority, she had intruded in the carriage and had spoiled a cosey hour of chat. And the worst of it was that one was so powerless here. The Herr Baron had hardly any eyes for his little daughter; they were employed elsewhere, as she knew very well. Had he not escorted *her* back to the Owl's Nest yesterday evening through the night and rain?

She looked out of the window, nodded as if something especial had occurred to her, and then wrote on:

"Yesterday in my weekly bulletin to Princess Thekla with regard to her grandchild's health, I added various hints, which, after all of which I informed you, must certainly have thrown the Princess Helena into one of her fits of rage. It is almost incredible, that young lady's capacity for jealousy, of which I have often told you.

"Moreover, my dear Palmer, yesterday evening as I

was passing the study, on my way from the ironing-room, where I had had a dispute with a housemaid,—you have no idea of the vexations one must encounter in this model household in having a little extra work done,—I heard, in passing, the little goose—*ci-devant* swan—declare to her faithful adorer that she meant to go to Altenstein every day. Thus far your prophecy, you see, has been verified. How did you put it?—‘There is no surer means of depriving a timid lover of the last vestige of common sense than to play a little hide-and-seek with him.’ I never should have thought it! To be sure, you say, the Duke’s ardour has cooled,—*tant mieux!* Permit me, by the way, to have some slight doubt as to this last. I think I know his Serene Highness better.

“To-morrow I hope to see you. Mademoiselle Beata has instituted a grand cleaning. On these occasions she covers her head with a white handkerchief and dusts the portraits of her ancestors with a long feather duster. High festival is held: there are potato-dumpplings with baked fruit for dinner. Oh, we lead an idyllic life here! I cannot stand it, my dear Palmer, much longer, I can assure you. Arrange that the stay at Altenstein shall be short, then my captivity will come to an end. Find cholera-bacilli in the spring-water, or turn loose a few dozen rats and mice in their Highnesses’ rooms, or let the ghost of the late colonel or of the fair Spaniard ‘walk,’ or contrive a stroke of lightning; I don’t care what, if it only drives away the inmates of Altenstein and lets me once more behold the roofs of the capital. I cannot breathe in this cow-stable.”

Here she broke off and turned her head towards the next room, whence a child’s cries were audible. An

expression of irritation appeared on the listener's full white face. "Oh, heavens, I wish I——" she muttered and arose.

"Frau von Berg, the child is very restless," said the nurse.

"Give her some milk, then ; good heavens, it must be hungry. What else can ail her?"

"It will not take anything, madame."

"Then take the child out ; it *must* be quiet."

"I dare not take the little thing out while it has the wet compress on its chest ; the doctor particularly forbade——"

Frau von Berg threw down her pen and rustled into the next room.

"Hush ! Be quiet !" she called in her harshest voice, clapping her hands as she approached the bed.

There was such an angry threat in her eyes that the child stopped crying for a minute, only to begin again louder than ever after the pause. There was something so piteous, so suffering, in the cry, that the nurse left the table where she had been preparing the child's food, and hurried to the bedside, while footsteps were suddenly heard in the corridor, and the next moment Baron Gerold appeared.

"Is Leonie ill?" was his first question, while his eyes sought the little creature, who, as she lay in bed, stretched out her arms to him and ceased crying.

Frau von Berg was confused, but she kept her place at the foot of the bed. "No," she replied ; "only hungry and wayward."

"But that was not the cry of a wayward child," he said, curtly and decidedly.

"It is possible that she does not feel very well," the stately woman declared. "I have thought for some

time that the air here is too bracing for the little thing. Imagine what the transition must be from the soft, warm atmosphere of the Riviera to this cool, sharp mountain air."

He looked at her gravely. "Do you think so?" he asked. His tone brought the blood to her cheeks; she dreaded the Baron's sarcasm. "I regret," he continued, with composure, "that the poor child should have been ordered directly to this cool, sharp mountain air by the first physician of Nice. Unfortunately, it must become accustomed to it, Nice being entirely out of the question at present, since its father is forced to stay here. Besides, my dear Frau von Berg, 'the cool, sharp air' seems to me to have been beneficial already; yesterday I saw the child creep quickly from one end of the room to the other, and rise to its feet by that chair without assistance."

Frau von Berg shrugged her shoulders slightly. "What is that for a child two years old?" she said.

"Be logical, madame; the question is not of the child's age, but of its improvement in health. I should like to tell you of something which will probably interest you. Her Highness the Princess Thekla, with the Princess Helena, is shortly coming to Neuhaus for a few weeks, to convince herself personally of her grandchild's welfare. Where could her Highness have learned that the Reitenbach physician is at present attending my child. Have you any idea?"

Frau von Berg changed colour, but made no reply, merely shrugging her shoulders again.

"I never mentioned it in my letters to her Highness," he continued, walking towards the window. "I dislike all intermeddling in the arrangements which I make. The Princess Thekla is a homœopath, and has

her pocket filled with pellets. Have you really no idea, Frau von Berg?"

She shook her head. "None."

He scarcely seemed to heed her; he stood motionless at the window, gazing out at the road which traversed the forest opposite, like a white, shining band. Along it the ducal vehicle was driving rapidly; for a moment a pale face appeared behind the glass of its window, and then the equipage disappeared,—Claudine was driving to Altenstein.

When he turned round he looked strangely pale. Frau von Berg watched him with a malicious smile hovering about the corners of her mouth; she, too, had seen the carriage. He did not notice her smile, but, approaching the bed, where his child now lay asleep, he gazed down at the frail little creature for a long time.

Frau von Berg softly withdrew to the next room. As he stood by the bed, a hard, bitter expression gathered about his lips. The old nurse looked at him from behind the blue bed-curtains. Could the Herr Baron dislike the poor little thing because it had cost his idolized wife her life when it was born? Yes, yes, that was often the case! Poor thing! such an innocent little creature, and yet condemned to be looked at so reproachfully always. Poor thing!

Suddenly the man at the bedside turned away and hastily left the room. The old woman stooped and held her hands above the sleeping child as if to shield it; she was sure the door would close with a crash behind him, he looked so desperate. Thank heaven, although it was closed hurriedly and firmly, the child did not wake.

Yes, Claudine was driving to Altenstein. She was sitting in the carriage with the calm, proud expression of countenance now usual with her. She had attended betimes to her housekeeping, and after the mid-day meal had changed her Cinderella costume for the tasteful toilette of soft dark-blue silk which the modiste had sent her home a few days before she had resigned her post at court. She had not donned it from vanity; she was forced to dress thus, for her Highness had declared yesterday in the course of conversation that she disliked black clothes.

When Claudine entered the tower-room to take leave of her brother, he gazed at her in surprise.

"How beautiful you look!" he said proudly, kissing her brow.

She looked at him confused and anxious. "I have no other gown, Joachim, and in this cloudy weather——"

"I am not finding fault with it," he rejoined, pleasantly. "I was only admiring the effect of your fair hair set off by the deep blue. Good-bye, my little sister. You can go without an anxiety; Elizabeth is happy with Fräulein Lindenmeyer, and I am writing. What are you waiting for, my darling? Are you troubled about anything?"

She approached him hesitatingly, and her lips moved slightly, as though she would have spoken. Then she turned hastily, murmured an 'Adieu,' and went. She could not submit the question in her mind to him, the dreamer, with his gentle spirit, for decision. The only right way was to act for herself. And so she got into the carriage with the uncomfortable sensation that must assail a noble nature when all about it is not clear and transparent, and yet with the firm resolve to find of herself a way out of her present perplexity.

But what in the world should she do next? The Duchess called her—she must obey her summons. Unless she were really ill, she had no possible reason for refusing; a falsehood she would not tell, and the truth could not be told. And, after all, was she not safest in the society of the Duchess? None of the ardent, entreating glances which she feared could be cast towards her in the wife's boudoir; in the presence of that loving and lovable creature every wild wish must be suppressed. She pressed her lace handkerchief to her throbbing temples, as if she could thus deaden the pain which had raged there all day long.

The pointed gables of Altenstein were just visible among the tree-tops, and, for the first time after long, dreary days of rain, a golden gleam of sunshine broke through the clouds and sparkled on the gilded top of the tower, as if her old home were extending her a welcome.

"Her Highness has been expecting you with impatience," old Frau von Katzenstein whispered to her in the antechamber. "Her Highness wishes to hear you sing a new song of Brahms's, and has been practising the accompaniment for two hours this morning. She is terribly nervous and excited, dearest Gerold; there has been a little dispute with his Highness."

The young girl looked inquiringly into the old lady's face.

"*Entre nous*, dearest Gerold," the latter whispered, "her Highness wanted the Duke to take tea with her this afternoon, and he refused so decidedly as to be almost unkind. 'We are to have some music,' her Highness said timidly; 'and I thought, dear, that you took such an interest in singing? I believe you never missed one of mamma's musical evenings?' His High-

ness replied, 'True, true, my dear; but—just now I have sent for Palmer to consult with him; and, since the weather is brighter, I must go to Meerfeld this evening; you know the physician insists upon my being as much as possible in the open air.'

Claudine rolled up her sheet of music; she had changed colour, and, painfully affected by all this, she asked, "Will you not conduct me to her Highness?"

"In a moment, dearest Gerold; only let me tell you this: the Duchess turned away from him, saying under her breath, 'You do not want to come, Adalbert!' And then he left her without replying, and she burst into tears."

The Duchess was seated at her writing-table when Claudine entered, and she held out her hand to her visitor. "It is as if the sunshine just breaking forth outside had come into my room with you, dear Claudine," she said kindly in her weary, husky voice. "You cannot think how lonely one gets sometimes even with those who should be—who are—everything to us. I got out my diary in my restlessness, and I have been looking through it, and it has done me good. I have had much, very much happiness, and that consoles me, and makes me grateful. Sit down. Are those the songs I was speaking of?" She took the sheets and turned them over. "Yes, these are they. 'Faithful Love'—you must sing that one to me after a while, dear; now I must beg you to take a little walk with me. I long so for fresh air, and, thank heaven! the sky is clearing."

When the ladies returned at the end of an hour, they had tea, and then Claudine went to the piano. The Duchess lay back in her reclining-chair and listened; old Frau von Katzenstein sat at the window

behind her mistress, and watched her every movement.

Claudine's fine, rich contralto floated through the room, which the twilight had already invaded; the notes were before her, but she did not need them. Song followed song; she sang with a melancholy enjoyment; the costly grand piano was, oddly enough, placed in the same spot in the same room where her own instrument had stood formerly. The memory of the full, frank happiness of her youth awoke within her in this apartment; she hardly knew how it was that she found herself singing Joachim's favourite song,—

“From youth's time of bliss, from youth's time of bliss,
Sounds a song, a song divine.
How long past it is, how long past it is,
What once, what once was mine!”

She sang the simple, pathetic air with intense feeling, but in the midst of the last line her voice failed as if broken, and after a couple of false chords, which her hand struck mechanically, she was silent.

A gentle voice was heard saying, “I knew you would come, Adalbert.”

Claudine had risen, and stood gazing at the tall figure just bending to kiss his wife's hand. She courtesied, and grasped the back of her chair as if needing support.

“Pray go on singing, *Fräulein von Gerold*,” said the Duke; “it is a long time since I had the pleasure of listening to you.”

He sat in deep shadow beside his wife's chair. Claudine knew that the last rays of crimson from the west were falling full upon her own figure, and the knowledge confused her still more. She tried to regain her

composure, but when she sat down at the piano her voice sounded veiled and weak,—a spasm seemed to close her throat. She stammered an excuse and rose.

“How strange!” said the Duchess. “Have you ever felt it before, dearest Claudine?”

“Never, your Highness,” the girl stammered, with absolute truth.

“There are such nervous affections,” the Duke observed; “perhaps you have exacted too much already of Fräulein von Gerold.”

“Oh, that may be! Forgive me, dear Claudine, and take some rest,” the Duchess exclaimed, evidently distressed. She beckoned to the young girl to come and sit beside her on the low chair which the Duke had just left to pace the room to and fro with an almost inaudible tread.

“Sit so that I can see your face,” she said. “Indeed, you look quite ill; but your colour is returning. Good heavens, I believe you took fright at the Duke’s sudden entrance.—Adalbert!” she laughed, and tried to turn her head towards where he was now standing behind her chair, “it is your fault that she had to stop. Oh, you wretched man, what mischief you do!”

Involuntarily Claudine had raised her eyes to the Duke, thus addressed, only to avert them the next instant in mortal terror. There it was again, that ardent glance of entreaty! Above his wife’s head it encountered her own, while his voice sounded perfectly calm: “I should be sorry to think so, Fräulein von Gerold, and I really cannot imagine how my appearance here should seem startling or extraordinary. I——”

“Certainly not, your Highness,” Claudine replied, sitting erect. “I was tired at the moment, and had a little headache; it is almost gone now.”

"So much the better!" said the Duchess; "and now let us talk.—You are so silent, Adalbert. How came you to give up your expedition? Tell us! Was it really only because you wanted to spend this evening with me?" And as he passed her lounge in pacing the room again she followed him with happy eyes, and went on without waiting for an answer: "Only fancy, Adalbert, your eldest son has composed a poem,—his first verses; his tutor brought it to me to-day; he had found it between the leaves of the boy's Latin exercise book. Do you not want to read it?—Dearest Claudine, there it is on my writing-table, under the paper-weight,—no, under the statuette of the Duke. Thank you; will you not read it aloud to us? It is expressed in childlike fashion, but it shows such earnest feeling."

Claudine took the paper, and, going to the window, read by the fading daylight the large, childish characters,—

"When I to manhood shall attain,
There is a word I'll live by ever;
Within my heart I'll write it plain,
And thence it shall be banished never.
True is this word: *true* will I be,
True to my people and my God;
True to my friends eternally,
True to myself, to duty *true*,
And *true* to *truth* I will be too."

Claudine could not see the Duchess's face, but she saw her stretch out her hand to her husband and heard her tremulous whisper, "Your son, Adalbert!" then aloud, "Is it not delightful?"

The Duke had paused in his walk to and fro. "Yes, Liesel, it is delightful. God so guide him that he may never find it hard to keep true!"

"That never *can* be hard, Adalbert,—never!"

"Never?" he asked.

"Never! What do you say, Claudine?"

"There may be cases," the girl began, "when it costs a hard struggle to keep true."

"But such truth would not satisfy love," the Duchess interposed, and her cheeks flushed. "It would only be an artificial truth."

"Yes," said the Duke, in an undertone. The monosyllable had a strange intonation.

"It would not be truth, it would be a sense of duty," the Duchess declared, eagerly.

"Truth to duty; that is perhaps the highest grade of truth, your Highness," said Claudine, gently.

"Ah, that is hair-splitting, my dear child," the Duchess interposed again. "Truth that costs a struggle has lost its value. If, for example,—*sans comparaison*,—if the Duke,"—she hesitated a moment, and an arch smile flitted across her face,—“if he should sometimes—once, we will say—allow his thoughts to dwell fondly upon you, Claudine, his conjugal truth would be valueless, even though he were actually the most dutiful of husbands.—Do you hear, Adalbert? In my opinion you would be untrue.”

The Duke had turned away, and was gazing out of the window. Claudine looked positively horrified. The Duchess did not notice it; the idea was so diverting that she laughed in childlike glee, as only those can laugh who feel secure in the possession of great happiness, and therefore can jest at the possibility of losing it.

"Claudine," she exclaimed, in the midst of her laughter, "how you look! Do not be annoyed; it is not high treason.—You know, Adalbert, how I love to tease?"

Good heavens! this pain in my chest! It is the laughing.—Claudine! Claudine!” The word died away in a violent fit of coughing. “Water! water!” she gasped.

The terrified girl sprang up and ran to the table, where stood a carafe of water. Frau von Katzenstein, who had rushed into the room, supported the sufferer, who gasped for breath, while the Duke stood beside the lounge with a gloomy air, his wife holding his hand in a convulsive clasp.

She was racked by the terrible cough, and was unable to drink. The physician, hurriedly summoned, glided noiselessly into the room, and Claudine stepped aside to make way for the kindly old man.

“Dear Doctor Westermann,” the invalid panted forth, “I am better already; it is almost gone; I can breathe again!”

Gray twilight reigned in the apartment; Claudine had withdrawn to the recess of a window; the ground seemed burning beneath her feet as she gazed in a sort of bewilderment at the group in the centre of the room.

The Duke moved aside, and the sufferer asked, in an exhausted voice, “Did I startle you, Adalbert? Forgive me!”

He made a gesture of denial, but there was in it a degree of suppressed impatience.

“Her Highness must lie down,” said the physician.

The Duke, who had gone towards the door, suddenly returned. Frau von Katzenstein supported the invalid, who rose obediently to go to her room. She waved her hand kindly to Claudine: “*Au revoir!* I shall send for you, dearest Claudine, in a few moments.—Good-night, dear heart,” she said to the Duke. “I shall be all right to-morrow.”

As soon as she had disappeared behind the portière the physician went up to the Duke: "It is nothing alarming, your Highness, but the patient must be treated with extreme caution; there must be none of the exciting conversation, the intellectual discussions in which her Highness delights. Her Highness's temperament is one of extreme sensitiveness; she must lead a monotonous, commonplace life."

"My dear doctor, you know the Duchess; she really only laughed a little."

"I merely wished to remind your Highness," the old man replied, with a bow.

The Duke waved his hand impatiently: "Good-evening, my dear Westermann."

Claudine was terrified; she retired to the darkest corner of the window-recess, and looked with dread after the retreating figure of the physician. She was alone,—alone with the Duke. That which she had always prudently endeavoured to avoid, that which he had evidently desired, ardently desired, had taken place. But perhaps he had forgotten her presence; he was restlessly pacing to and fro; oh, he might not perceive her; the single candle, which had been hastily lighted in the candelabrum on the chimney-piece, scarcely sufficed to illuminate a small circle about the hearth, and she was hidden behind the silken hangings of the window-recess.

She waited breathless, like a hunted deer which sees no escape from its pursuer. She heard the beating of her own heart as plainly as his step upon the soft carpet. Ah, she shrank; the steps approached her hiding-place; a tall figure appeared between the curtains, and a voice made strangely husky by passionate emotion uttered her name: "Claudine."

She timidly stepped aside, as if trying to discern some way of escape.

"Claudine," he repeated, bending over her so that in spite of the darkness she could see the entreaty in his eyes, "this scene has troubled you? It was not my fault. I would fain ask your forgiveness."

He tried to take her hand, but it was concealed amid the folds of her dress. Not a word issued from her compressed lips; she stood mute, on the defensive, gazing at him with beautiful, indignant eyes.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"I have the honour, your Highness, to be the friend of the Duchess!" she said, in desperation.

A melancholy smile hovered for a moment upon his face. "I know it. You are not wont to be of those who contract sudden friendships; but—you think to avail yourself of everything."

"Such seems to be your Highness's opinion."

"Mine? No, on my honour, Claudine! But you,—you do indeed hasten to take refuge behind the barrier which this friendship erects between you and me."

"Yes," she said, frankly; "and I hope your Highness will respect this barrier, or——"

"I recognize and honour your reserve, Claudine," he interrupted her, standing respectfully at some distance from her. "Do not imagine that I shall dog your footsteps like a love-sick page. Nothing shall remind you that I love you as passionately as ever man loved woman. Only allow me to be in your society without encountering the icy coldness which you maintain towards me; grant me a hope for a future in which there may be sunshine for me, Claudine,—only this hope!"

"I do not love your Highness!" she said, haughtily erect. "Permit me to withdraw."

"No! One word more, Claudine! I ask for no admission of your preference; this is neither the time nor the place for it; you are right to remind me of it. Is it my fault that I was forced to marry without love, that my first ardent passion belongs to you? The same fate has befallen others who were better than I. It comes without our will; the love exists, and increases with every hour the more we struggle against it. I do not know that you share my feelings. I only hope that you do, and I do not wish to live without this hope." He approached her and leaned towards her. "Just one word, Claudine," he entreated, in a low, humble tone. "May I hope? Yes, Claudine? Say yes, and not a look shall betray our secret."

"No, your Highness; by the love I bear my brother I declare that you are entirely indifferent to me!" she said, earnestly, retreating still farther into the recess.

"Is there another, Claudine? do you love another? If that were so——!" came in the same passionate tones.

She made no reply.

He turned away with a gesture of despair and walked to the opposite door, then returned once more.

"Do you imagine that every regard would not be had for your honour? Do you imagine I could degrade you?" he asked. "Do you imagine——"

"Your Highness does so," she interrupted him, "in speaking to me of love in your invalid wife's apartment."

"If you think so——" he said, sadly.

"By heaven, I do! I do think so, your Highness!" the girl exclaimed.

"Claudine, I entreat!" he whispered, and again he paced the room, so hastily that the flame of the candle

on the chimney-piece wavered in the draught and burned more dimly. Once more he approached her. "You know that my brother, the Crown Prince, died suddenly, shortly before my father's death, about twelve years ago?" he said, inquiringly.

She mutely assented.

"But you do not know that at that time our court had entered into negotiations with that of X. as to a project of marriage between the Princess Elise and the Crown Prince, my brother. The affair was wellnigh concluded when my brother died, and I inherited his rights, and also his duties. After the period of mourning had expired I went to X. and wooed the bride."

"It was a voluntary act, your Highness."

"Not at all! This marriage was but another burden added to that already imposed upon me by my succession. The Princess Elise, who received me without a suspicion in her large, childlike eyes, was as little aware of the proposed alliance with my brother as of the views with which I sought her. She is susceptible, and it cost me but little trouble to win her affection. At that time I was supremely indifferent to women; I knew very little of the best, and the rest bored me. At first I rather disliked the Princess Elise; I cannot endure women who are always hovering in realms of the sublime. I hate overstrained feeling, exaggeration 'now soaring to heaven, now sunk in despair.' I thought at times her sudden dissolvings into tears would drive me mad. Later, what had at first repelled me became a matter of indifference to me. I have always been an attentive husband, and have since her illness shown a certain forbearance for her caprices; I honour and esteem her as the mother of my children; but my heart was untouched, and grew more indiffer-

ent as her affection for me increased. I cannot help it; no reasoning upon the subject can do any good. Then I saw you. I know—yes, yes, I know you judged my preference by the light of inherited ideas and fled from it to your forest home; but my ardent longing drove me to pursue you thither, and I find you here as unapproachable as ever—nay, the friend of the Duchess.”

An uncertain expression hovered for an instant upon his face. “Well, Claudine, I will acquiesce for the present,” he went on; “only one question you must answer: do you love another?”

She was silent; her fair face flushed crimson with maidenly shame as she bent her head.

“Say no!” the Duke whispered, passionately.

“Her Highness begs Fräulein von Gerold to come to her in her bedroom, and to bring the volume of Schefel’s songs, that she may read some of them aloud to her Highness,” said Frau von Katzenstein, entering the room.

Claudine started, and looked up as if suing for pity.

“Yes or no, Claudine: are your affections engaged?” he whispered, authoritatively.

She retreated a step, and courtesied low. “Yes!” she said, firmly, and then passed him with head erect, the book, which she had mechanically taken from the table, in her hand. Read aloud now? She felt paralyzed!

The Duchess was lying in her huge French canopied bed, the heavy, red silk hangings of which were drawn aside. The entire apartment was furnished with this intense red, the favourite colour of its inmate. From the ceiling hung a chandelier of ruby glass. Beside the

bed stood a table covered with red silk, on which a lamp with a red shade was burning, and where stood a folding leather case holding the photographs of the Duke and the young Princes. On the opposite wall, in a heavy gilt frame, was a wonderful copy of the *Madonna della Sedia*; the Duchess's first glance on awaking could not but rest on this charming picture.

Her Highness seemed to be much better; she lay with a certain sense of comfort beneath her red coverlet, and smiled at Claudine as she entered. "Sit down here on this ottoman and read me the Thuringian songs, dear Claudine. Did the Duke stay with you? Was he very much distressed by that attack of coughing? I am so sorry to have to cough when he is by; I know how it depresses him. Was he very sad?"

The invalid looked keenly in the face of the girl, who did not know what reply to make. She sat down and stooped to pick up her handkerchief, hoping thus to gain time. What a fearful dilemma was this!

"Claudine," said the Duchess, "I believe you all think me very ill, more ill than I really am. Read to me. I do not wish you to answer me. There, where my marker is."

And Claudine read, in a tremulous voice,—

"No pain the German forest brooks;
Within its depths they vanish,
And every ill from life and looks
Its healthful breezes banish——"

"Do you hear?" the Duchess interrupted her,—*"do you hear? I, too, shall recover here! And to-morrow the sun will shine, and we will go out among the firs and inhale health. Oh, my beloved home!"*

* * * * *

As Claudine was descending the staircase to drive home, Herr von Palmer met her, and accompanied her all the way down. Unperceived by her, he motioned to the maid whom the Duchess had sent down with her to withdraw.

"Fräulein von Gerold," he began, with an exaggerated show of respect,—he could not have been more servile in manner had she been Duchess already,—"his Highness has intrusted me with the flattering commission of placing a note in your hands. I thus fulfil it." He held out to her a note sealed with the ducal arms. "It concerns her Highness the Duchess, and, his Highness says, requires no answer."

She was forced to take it, although she would gladly have repulsed the hand that offered it to her. How could the Duke be so careless as to send her a letter, a sealed letter, by this creature? She tore open the envelope in his presence and read the few lines it enclosed :

"CLAUDINE,—Your character is unique, and, consequently, your judgment of what is unique will be correct. After your last word, I have only one request to make: remain the Duchess's friend in spite of all. Do not let what I have said result in your avoidance of Altenstein. It need not do so, Claudine. On my word you may trust me!

ADALBERT."

With the note and envelope in the hand that hung by her side she hastily traversed the hall. Herr von Palmer followed her, and helped her respectfully into the coupé, not forgetting to gather up and arrange her train as carefully as though he had been a mother taking care for her daughter's ball-dress. Not until

the servant closed the door of the vehicle did he retire with a low bow.

"*Au revoir*," he said, as the footman sprang up beside the coachman, and the horses started. Then, with a smile, he drew from the right sleeve of his coat a small paper. "You ought to be more careful, my lovely Claudine," he murmured, reading the lines by the light of the lantern above the door.

With a satisfied nod, and humming an opera air, he re-entered the castle and sought his room on the ground-floor. Here he lighted a cigar, threw himself into an arm-chair, and re-read the note. He had known its contents for an hour; he read privately everything, one might say, that the Duke wrote, from a distance, from the movement of the pen; if the worst came to the worst, an envelope could be opened. To-day he had had no trouble, for before the Duke had enclosed his note he had sprung up from the table where he had been writing to pace the room, and thus the contents of the sheet had been revealed to the falcon-eyes on the watch. Nevertheless, it was pleasant to possess the original.

"His Highness appears to have made a somewhat stormy appeal," he murmured, "and she has repulsed him with virtuous indignation,—threatened not to come again. And now he begs her for the Duchess's sake not to persist in such cruelty, and promises amendment. With time won, all is won, he thinks. It is developing quite logically,—no one can deny that. Hm! She is wise; she will never be satisfied with merely wreathing his Highness's brow with roses; she will desire to aid in his government. Such a woman always thinks she can atone for her doubtful position by what are called virtuous deeds; she would fain en-

noble the unhappy man whom she has in her toils, would fain show the people that their beloved sovereign is in no unworthy hands; they shall be made to adore her, kneeling, calling her 'the country's good angel.' And the wisest of such women, in their devotion to petty interests, see only what is just before their eyes, and in this case the object in question might possibly be—myself!"

He blew the smoke from his cigar towards the ceiling, and gazed meditatively at the frescos there.

"She cannot endure me," he soliloquized further. "I am to her what Mephistopheles was of old to innocent Margaret, and it is clear that some day she will say to her princely Faust,—

'The man who with thee goes, thy mate,
Within my deepest, inmost soul I hate,'

and so on. That must be prevented. I will not allow it to reach the point of the Duke's believing or not from her that I am a scoundrel. In the mean time—take care! The Berg will help; she has an extraordinary talent for intrigue; positively, I am almost afraid of that woman sometimes."

"Supper is served," a lackey announced. Herr von Palmer arose without undue haste, carefully locked up the note in a huge antique cabinet, on the doors of which was carved the Gerold escutcheon, arranged his scanty locks before a tall mirror, bathed his delicate skinny hands in floods of cologne, yawned slightly, took his crush hat and gloves from the servant who was waiting respectfully, and after a glance at the clock, where the hour-hand pointed to ten, went to the small dining-room, where the few gentlemen whom the Duke had selected to attend him in his present

residence were assembled,—the old Chamberlain von Schlotbach, the Adjutant von Rinkleben, whose rank was that of captain, and the Squire von Meerfeld, ‘a fellow like a young dog,’ according to Palmer’s description. The latter did not seem especially to rejoice in the friendship of these three gentlemen. “Excuse me,” he said to the assembled group; “I have kept you waiting. I was engaged in his Highness’s service, and a most delightful service, gentlemen! His Highness ordered me to conduct the lovely Claudine von Gerold to the carriage.”

“By Jove! has she been here again?” the squire asked, with unconcealed surprise.

“She has just left the ducal apartments.”

“You mean ‘the apartments of her Highness,’ Herr von Palmer,” the captain corrected him, sharply, while his face flushed slightly.

“I had the pleasure of encountering the lovely guest of this house in the upper corridor,” Palmer replied, smiling significantly.

“Indeed?”

‘And whence she came they could not tell,
For all trace of her presence vanished
When once again she bade farewell,’ ”

declaimed the squire, laughing.

The captain glanced angrily at him. “Fräulein von Gerold was with the Duchess, singing in her drawing-room, and afterwards staying with her Highness in her bedroom,” he said, in a loud, decided tone.

“Extraordinarily well informed,” Palmer whispered, and then bowed low;—the Duke had just entered.

“I cannot comprehend Claudine von Gerold,” the captain said, gravely, as, after supper, he was walking with Von Meerfeld along the corridor leading to their

room. "It is misplaced courage; she ought to avoid the lion's den. It is incredible, the rashness with which a woman secure in her own virtue will risk her reputation."

"Perhaps she enjoys the dangerous pastime of rope-dancing," Meerfeld replied, carelessly: "if she stumbles, there are arms extended to receive her; if she does not stumble, so much the better. But I should think it might be quite amusing; it is infernally stupid in this German Aranjuez."

"It might be so, my dear Meerfeld, with some women, but I must beg you to weigh your words with regard to the lady in question."

"Do not take it so tragically, captain dear," the other said, with a laugh. "Do not lose sleep over it. His Highness had by no means the air of a happy lover; he was more than cross. Ennui! ennui! This Altenstein was such an insane idea. Whatever stupidity one might be guilty of here, I should plead extenuating circumstances."

As Claudine drove up to the gate at the Owl's Nest, she still held a crushed piece of paper in her hand. Old Heinemann, who had been waiting there for her for a long time, lantern in hand, received scarcely more than a nod of recognition from his young mistress. She flew before him into the house, and as he bolted the door, after following her, he only heard the rustle of her silken skirt in the upper story; then a door closed, and all was quiet.

In Claudine's small room quiet also reigned; it was as dark and silent as if no one were there; and yet

there was a figure seated at the window gazing out into the forest that enclosed the lonely house in a deeper darkness than that of the starless night, and endeavouring with all the power of her mind to review calmly what the day had brought forth. "What has happened?" she asked herself. And she began: "The Duke has made me a declaration of love, and—I repulsed him,—repulsed him; but at what cost!" At the cost of the confession of her most sacred secret; that which she had hitherto not dared to confess to herself, so wildly did her heart throb at the mere thought of it,—that she loved. Her pride was in arms at the fact, and yet now it was known to him who had dared to approach her with an insulting declaration. Could the Duke suspect whom she loved? That would be intolerable!

Involuntarily she crushed together the note in her hand, and hot drops of shame stood in her eyes. She rose hastily, lit a candle, and, unfolding the paper, tried to smooth it out; then, leaning upon the table, she gazed in dismay at the empty envelope,—there was nothing else,—the note was gone! The next minute she began a hurried search, upon the table, the floor, the place where she had been sitting; she shook out her wrap, and the skirt of her gown, and at last, taking the candle with her, she went out of her room and searched the stairs of the sleeping, silent house. There was nothing to be found! Stealthily she slipped the bolt of the front door and looked out upon the stone step. There was nothing to be seen! In her anxiety she passed, shading the flickering flame of the candle with her hand, along the garden-path to the gate; possibly she had dropped the note in alighting from the carriage. The grated gate leading out upon the road

creaked as she opened it; the ray from her candle flitted ghost-like over the ground,—there was nothing white lying there. Suddenly the candle flickered and went out, leaving her in the dark,—a darkness which seemed at first so dense to her eyes, accustomed to the guiding light, that she paused for a moment irresolute, unable to decide which way to turn to re-enter the garden.

Ah, there above her window Joachim's study-lamp was burning peacefully, and sending a narrow ray out into the garden and along the road. What if he knew she was standing out here, her heart filled with distress and anger! She envied him the peace of his quiet room, where no storms from without ever penetrated; *his* vessel was safe in port, while hers was still driving out upon the rolling sea, and God alone knew where it would find a harbour! Involuntarily she turned and gazed longingly across the dark mountains in the direction of Neuhaus, and just above where it lay a rift in the clouds showed a single star. She smiled amid her tears; it consoled her,—it was a good omen.

On a sudden she started and slipped into the open gate. The sound of hoofs was audible on the road; it came nearer in a rapid trot; the horseman passed close to her, and just where the ray of light fell on the road he paused and looked up at the window of the tower. She clutched the bars of the gate as if for support, and gazed at him. Lothar! What did he want here? A sensation of exquisite bliss possessed her; the candle-stick dropped from her hands, which she clasped as in prayer. Did she see aright? Was it really he? What did he want? Had he come to look up at her window? Oh for a sign that she was not dreaming!—that this was reality!

He turned his horse and slowly rode back ; the darkness again swallowed up his figure, but the sound of his horse's hoofs still rang in the ears of the trembling girl, until at last she slipped back into the house.

She had forgotten the lost note ; she was unable to think ; her eyes burned, her lips were dry, and her temples throbbed. "Rest ! rest !" she whispered, and buried her hot forehead in her pillow, after hurriedly seeking her couch. "Rest ! Sleep !"

The next day there were great changes at Neuhaus. On the ground-floor next the sitting-room to the left of the large hall, in the lofty, spacious dining-room stood a table differing essentially from that usually spread there. While it had hitherto been furnished with a spotlessly white but somewhat coarse linen cloth, and napkins of the same quality, to-day it was covered with the finest damask hanging down on all sides nearly to the parquettèd floor, which was polished to a dangerous degree. The simple service of English stoneware with blue edges was replaced by costly old Meissen porcelain, long the pride of the Neuhaus cupboards ; beautifully shaped *épergnes*, holding fruits and confections, appeared instead of the metal baskets in which Beata was wont to have the early pears, winter apples, or little cakes served at dessert ; and the strong but clumsy knives and forks with buckhorn handles had given way to silver, bright and shining as if just from the shop, and yet marked with the scutcheon and monogram of the Gerolds, and with a date which would have borne witness to its antiquity even had it not been attested by its beauty of form.

The branches of the huge crystal chandelier above the table, which was set out for seven people, were furnished with yellowish wax candles, as were the numerous sconces on the walls. On the tall oaken sideboard there was a dazzle of silver and glass. The sun, that daily visited the apartment about this time, peeped in amazed at this unwonted splendour, gliding here and there in prismatic colour, and touching the brown hair above Beata's white forehead as she stood at a table arranging flowers in a pair of vases.

"Oh, do stand up!" she murmured, impatiently, as a couple of gillyflowers fell over on their sides repeatedly. "There, that will do." And she stuck a red rose in the midst of the brilliant structure, and contemplated it with satisfaction, as she handed it to a maid who was standing beside her. "Carry it to Frau von Berg, Sophy; she is to put it in the Princess Thekla's room. The master desired it placed there. And come down again as quick as you can and dust all the chairs once more, and close the blinds; the sun is coming in."

Beata then walked around the table, and paused, with a shake of her head, at the place which she, by Lothar's decree, was to occupy next to the Princess Thekla,—to-night for the first time, and then daily for four long weeks. How could she endure it? There lay the soup-ladle, the symbol of her dignity; Lothar wished her to fulfil her usual duty: "For we are at Neuhaus, not at court, and I dislike nothing more than to have the soup handed from a side-table; it is so easily spilled."

But this was the only direction given by him with relation to the impending visit; everything else he had intrusted to his sister's wise head and capable

hands, and to all appeals from her he had replied, "Do just as you think fit; you will be sure to have everything as it should be."

And now her gigantic work of preparation was over. She had tied a white kerchief over her glossy brown hair, and had gone through the house in calico dress and apron with keys, duster, and broom, had 'given legs,' as she expressed it, to the servants, had seen to the hanging of curtains and the laying of carpets, and had produced from chests and cupboards the finest and best of her store. All was finished, and she had a couple of hours in which to rest before presenting herself as mistress of the household to her guests.

The entire upper story had been arranged for Lothar's distinguished mother-in-law and sister-in-law, the lady-in-waiting had been assigned a pretty room next to Frau von Berg's, the gentleman in attendance, with the chamberlain, occupied the pavilion in the garden, and her Grace's maid was near her mistress. Lothar retained his room on the right of the hall, Beata's dear old sitting-room and bedchamber were undisturbed,—she must have a refuge somewhere.

She now walked along the corridor towards the door of her sitting-room; there was a shade of amusement on her fresh face as she took a piece of chalk from her key-basket and wrote on the brown panel 'No admittance.' Then, still smiling, she entered her kingdom, where she sat resting in an arm-chair for a while, and then sprang up and hurried into her bedroom. After a few moments she reappeared in a large brown straw hat, with a light wrap thrown around her shoulders. As she left the room she put on a pair of thread gloves, and while buttoning them

went into the kitchen, where the housekeeper was taking crisp cakes from the oven.

"It is a good thing, Rieka, that a few are baked," said Beata, taking half a dozen of the delicate little trifles. "Give me some paper,—there. I am going for a walk, and shall be back punctually. Don't make any mistakes with the cooking, and don't put on the peas too soon; let the saddle of venison be exactly an hour before the fire. I repeat, I have no time while I am at table to attend to such things, or to see whether the trout are the right colour and served with cress. The entire responsibility is yours, Rieka."

She nodded, and went, walking quickly, straight from the kitchen into the park, where she followed a by-path out to the high-road. In fact, there was no excuse for her running away thus just when her reputation as head of a household was at stake. What if anything should go wrong?

"Never mind!" she said to herself; "when the whole pack has arrived I shall hardly be able to go to the Owl's Nest,—to Claudine and the child."

She almost ran, and by many short-cuts; her face was crimson as, at the end of half an hour, the Owl's Nest appeared among the trees; it was just three in the afternoon.

The child was playing with her doll's carriage in the shade of the old wall; she came with flying curls to meet her 'aunt,' who stooped and clasped the little girl in her extended arms.

"It was not pleasant, Aunt Beata," she complained; "it rained all the time, and Aunt Claudine drove away so often."

"But to-day the sun shines, and you can play in the garden; is not that pleasant?"

The little thing nodded, and tripped on beside her. "And Aunt Claudine is at home, too," she prattled away; "she is sitting in her room writing, and she has on such a pretty dress." When they reached the house door the child stopped and shook her fair head. "I am going to Heinemann," she said, and was off in an instant.

Beata mounted the narrow staircase and knocked at the door of her cousin's room. Claudine was in fact sitting at her writing-table, but she had finished writing; an addressed letter lay before her, and the fragrance of fine sealing-wax was perceptible in the room.

"Oh, Beata, is it you?" she said, wearily, and rose to meet her visitor.

"Aha!" said Beata. "In white with blue ribbons? What is it for? Are you going to Altenstein?"

The girl nodded: "I refused early this morning, but the Duchess would not take no for an answer. She wrote that if I could not come to her she should come to me; she is going to pick me up as she drives past." As she spoke she looked at Beata with an air of resignation. "It is so warm," she continued; "I longed for a thin dress. They say the colour of one's dress influences the mood of the wearer; but I might as well——"

"Wear black crape," Beata concluded her sentence as she sat down. "What is the matter with you? You look as if you had a headache." And she looked anxiously at Claudine's weary face.

"There is really nothing the matter with me, Beata."

"Really? Ah, that you get from the court! So happy a lady-in-waiting must always be well, just as a ballet-girl must always smile, even though her breath be wellnigh gone."

"You exaggerate, Beata," said Claudine, quietly. "No, I am not ill; but I am thinking that perhaps I shall go away from here for a while."

"You?" exclaimed her cousin. "Now?"

"Yes, yes; but do not say anything about it; Joachim knows nothing of it as yet," she replied. And before Beata could ask the question hovering upon her lips, Claudine interposed: "Did not you meet Joachim?"

"No," Beata replied, in a low tone.

"I think he meant to return Lothar's visit; and you know what a resolve that is for him. He went some time ago, and I am convinced that he will spend three hours on the way, for as he walks along all sorts of things occur to him, and then he sits down and writes, and takes notes in his note-book, and forgets time and place."

"He will not see Lothar," Beata said, hesitatingly. "Lothar has gone to Lobstedt."

"To Lobstedt?" asked Claudine. "Is he going away?"

"No; he is expecting the Princess Thekla and her daughter. Did you not know it? She is to spend four weeks at Neuhaus to enjoy her little grandchild."

"No," Claudine said, mechanically.

"I thought I had told you, Claudine."

To this Claudine made no reply. The silence that ensued was so profound that even the ticking of the small watch set with brilliants, in its pretty mother-of-pearl stand on the writing-table, was audible. Beata looked longingly out of the window. She would have liked to run back. She thought of her post as mistress of the household which she had faithlessly deserted, this day of all others, and in fancy she saw the figure of a man in the dim corridor at Neuhaus pausing before a

closed door whereon was inscribed in chalk, 'No admittance!' And she saw him shake his head and slowly turn away. He must not be allowed to go so,—no, no! He might never come again.

She suddenly sprang up: "Excuse me, Claudine, I must go; you know there are all sorts of things to attend to." The falsehood died on her lips. She blushed. "Good-bye, my darling!"

"Adieu, Beata."

"God bless me, you are ill, Claudine!" she exclaimed, now first noticing her cousin's extreme pallor.

"Oh, no, no!" the girl replied, while a wave of colour dyed her cheeks crimson. "I am perfectly well. Come, I will go down with you. Of course you have a great deal to do. And if you meet Joachim, tell him to come back before the ladies arrive; he is so shy, you know, so odd."

"He need not see them; I have my own room," murmured Beata.

"Oh, you do not know the Princess Helena," was the bitter rejoinder.

"Indeed?" asked Beata, as she went down-stairs with Claudine. "Give me some hints about this little Princess; I cannot get a word about her out of Lothar."

"Beata—I—you see, I am too prejudiced to be just. She does not like me, and always shows me the most disagreeable side of her character. Those whom she likes admire her excessively. She is a brilliant elf, attractive without being exactly pretty, full of vivacity, capricious——" She hesitated. "Yes, yes," she added, in an undertone, "she is very charming,—very. And now good-bye, Beata!"

"Are you crying?" asked her cousin. "Your eyes shine so."

"No," said Claudine, "I am not crying."

"Well, then, good-bye, dear child. Devise some new dresses. Lothar is going to give an entertainment. I think you will outshine this 'very charming' Princess, and I am sure you will help me with counsel and advice. I am as ignorant as a child of court etiquette. Adieu, my darling; good-bye."

Claudine hurried back into the house and up to her little room. Since yesterday the world seemed to have turned upside down. She knew only too well why the Princess Thekla was bringing her second daughter to Neuhaus.

"Lost!" she whispered, "lost forever! But can that be lost which has never been possessed?"

She was no poorer than hitherto, and yet since yesterday—since that strange, terrible yesterday—a hope had grown to giant size in her heart; involuntarily she had woven a thousand sweet, foolish fancies from her knowledge of Lothar's midnight ride. Hopes and fears had agitated her until the dawn, when she had fallen into an uneasy slumber; and when she awoke, his image, as she had seen it in the ray of light from Joachim's window, was still present with her.

What folly! He had not come to look with loving eyes for her shadow, but to convince himself that she was at home, as an honest girl should be. Oh, he was very careful of the honour of his name!

She pressed her eyes with her hands so closely that she seemed to see myriads of sparks, but in the midst of them hovered a slight girlish figure. She dropped her arms at her sides and walked to the window. Was she dreaming? Through the crimson spots that still danced before her eyes she saw on the other side of the garden gate the red liveries of the ducal servants,

and at the same moment Fräulein Lindenmeyer rushed into her room: "Claudine dear, Fräulein Claudine, their Highnesses!"

Claudine's step was far from firm as she walked to the mirror, put on a white straw hat, then allowed Fräulein Lindenmeyer to thrust a blue-lined parasol into her hand, and went down-stairs. She scarcely perceived that upon the lofty box of the pretty two-seated vehicle the Duke himself was holding the reins. Mechanically she kissed the hand the Duchess extended to her; the face of its owner was beaming with delight in the drive.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, dear Claudine! I am wonderfully well," she said, in her feeble, eager voice. "How could I be otherwise? Such heavenly weather, the delicious odour of the pines, the Duke driving me, and you beside me! Why, you must see for yourself."

They drove about the forest for hours; they stopped at a lonely mill beside a rushing brook, and the Duchess begged of the miller's astonished young wife a glass of cool milk, while the Duke threw the reins to the footman and stood by the carriage door chatting. With gracious condescension he asked the miller, who hurried out respectfully cap in hand, about his business, and bade him show the Duchess his three boys, whose ages corresponded with those of the three Princes, and the royal lady asked the fair-haired, sunburned children what they were going to be when they grew up; and when with one accord they answered, 'Soldiers!' she gave each a bright thaler stamped with the Duke's likeness. Then they drove on towards home, for the sun's rays were beginning to come aslant through the pine boughs.

The Duchess asked a thousand questions; it cost Claudine an effort to collect her wandering thoughts.

"There are guests at Neuhaus," the Duchess said, finally. "I see the standard of our family waving above the roof."

"Her Highness the Princess Thekla," Claudine said, wearily.

"And Helena?"

"The Princess Helena is also expected, your Highness."

"Adieu to delightful solitude!" the Princess said, with a sigh.

The equipage was just nearing the low wall of the Neuhaus park, when two landaus appeared, rolling swiftly along, coachmen and footmen in full livery. They met close to the entrance, and the Duke saluted with his whip, while the Duchess waved her hand amiably towards the carriage, upon the brown silk cushions of which sat two ladies opposite Baron Lothar. Claudine saw that the young Princess, in a becoming travelling-cloak of shining gray silk, its wide sleeves lined with blue, cast at her from beneath her pretty straw hat a glance of contemptuous surprise, that the Princess Thekla, as she half reluctantly accorded the salutation due to the reigning Duchess, glanced coldly at herself, and that Lothar appeared scarcely to notice her. In a couple of moments they had all disappeared.

"The future mistress of Neuhaus is just making her entrance there," said the Duke, turning on his lofty seat to glance at the pale face of the girl sitting beside his wife.

"Do you really think so, Adalbert? What a good thing for the poor little child!"

He did not reply. Claudine's hand grasped the handle of her parasol more tightly in her effort to control all evidence of agitation. Did the Duke suspect whom she cherished in her heart? She could not prevent her cheeks from flushing crimson, and once more she encountered the Duke's searching glance.

"She is a spoiled little creature," said the Duchess, leaning back negligently among the cushions. "I trust she may both confer and receive happiness. Between ourselves, dearest Claudine, I think Gerold's preference is returned by her, and regarded with favour by the Princess Thekla."

"I think so too, your Highness," Claudine assented, startling herself by the hard tone of her voice. She had grown wonderfully cold and quiet on the instant.

In the mean time the distinguished guests were established at Neuhaus. The Princess Helena had kissed her sister's child, whom Frau von Berg had presented to the ladies almost smothered in lace, and had then explored the mansion. She had gone up-stairs and down-stairs, had opened doors, had looked into rooms, and had asked the way to her brother-in-law's own particular domicile, whither she had instantly betaken herself. His rooms, with their pictures and trophies of the chase on the walls, their antique furniture and Eastern rugs, were the model of a bachelor's apartments, and she had gazed about her there, her black beady eyes wide with childish curiosity. She had been in the garden, and upon her return to the house had suddenly come to a door upon which was chalked in bold, decided characters 'No admittance.' Her Grace had instantly lifted the latch, and her dark head had peered inquisitively into the old-fashioned sitting-room. How comfortable it looked! How at-

tractively the light from the setting sun shone on the furniture, brown with age! And, oddly enough, there by the open window sat a slender man reading, his delicate profile sharply defined against the dark green of the trees outside. He was so absorbed in an old parchment-bound volume that he did not perceive the intruder.

The little Princess softly closed the door again, and flew up the broad oaken staircase. Up-stairs, she threw herself into an arm-chair and burst into a fit of laughter at the startled face of Frau von Berg, who was sitting in her usual place, writing.

"What could you mean, my dearest Berg, by what you have told us of this Neuhaus?" she asked, settling her little feet comfortably upon a cushion. "Your letters to mamma were full of 'not at all *comme il faut*,' of 'provincial ways,' etc. I think it charming, absolutely charming here. I shall not have a throb of the ennui which one could always see between the lines of your epistles. And as for the Baron's sister, she is an original, and is quite majestic in her gray silk gown. And the child, whose looks you complain of,—why, wash off the layer of violet powder that you have covered the poor little thing with, apparently to excite mamma's compassion, and it will look much better. At present it resembles you, dearest Berg, when you want to appear delicate."

"Your Grace!" exclaimed Frau von Berg, aggrieved, and flushing under 'the layer' of powder.

"Do not be vexed," the Princess continued; "rather give up such adornments. I think it is charming here, and I shall tell my brother-in-law so."

"Then your Grace will agree with him entirely; he, too, finds it charming here."

"Oh, I know what you are thinking, Berg," the Princess replied; "but that is ridiculous, simply ridiculous. Speak out, Berg dear, if you know anything positive," she went on, in a tone of triumphant security. "You can understand my interest as to who is to be the mother of that child." She waved her hand towards the adjoining room.

"Your Grace does not believe me," the lady pouted, with a passing glance at the bright black eyes fixed almost passionately on her face.

"Sometimes I do not, but I can generally discriminate between your truth and your fiction."

"Well, then I leave you to choose, Princess, whether to believe me or not," Frau von Berg began, eagerly. "He——"

"That is not true."

"But, your Grace, I have said nothing yet."

"Do not say anything, Alice: it is not so!" the Princess exclaimed, in a tone that was almost a threat. "He never looked at her. He always avoided her. You meant to tell of something else."

"As your Grace pleases. She——"

"She is interested and fettered elsewhere; I saw it," interposed Helena. "The Duke——"

"But I have said nothing as yet," Frau von Berg interposed in her turn. "If your Grace is so well informed, what is there for me to say?"

"Tell me, Alice," the Princess now entreated. "Can it be? Mamma is beside herself about it; she has never spoken to me since we met the Duke with *her* in the carriage, and her nose has grown very sharp; that is always a sign of storm; you know it is, Alice."

"But the Duchess was driving too, Princess."

"Oh, heavens!" Helena exclaimed, clasping her small

hands; "that poor good Liesel! As usual, she is soaring in loftier regions, and cannot see the woods because of the trees. I'll wager her Highness is writing another tragedy, which will be played next winter for our edification. Don't you remember last winter, Alice? But you were in Nice; I forgot. It was fearful! fearful! Once or twice, to be sure, the tears came into my eyes; but, on the whole—— heaven preserve us! There were three corpses on the stage in the last act, and I heard Count Windeck say to Fräulein von Moorsleben, 'Now be prepared! the prompter is going to stab the call-boy!'"

She laughed immoderately, and then in an instant grew grave: "But I really love her, Alice, in spite of it all; she is lovely, with all her sentimental nonsense. Poor, poor Liesel! If *she* had not been sitting beside her to-day I should have jumped out of the carriage and have given her a hug. Tell me, Alice, how can any one like to associate intimately with such an icicle as that Claudine?"

The summons to dinner came at this moment, and the Princess Helena ran off to have her curls arranged by her maid in her own room. The Princess Thekla was just going down-stairs on the arm of the master of the house, as the little Princess followed with Frau von Berg and the lady-in-waiting.

"Apropos, Alice," Helena asked, in an undertone, "who is the gentleman that lives in the room with the door marked 'No admittance'?"

"A gentleman, your Grace?"

"Why, yes, yes."

"Your Grace must have seen a ghost."

"Not at all. I shall ask Fräulein von Gerold." And she did so before they were well seated at table.

"That was my cousin Joachim, your Grace," Beata replied, and the soup-ladle trembled slightly in her hand.

"Claudine von Gerold's brother?"

"Yes, your Grace."

"The Owl's Nest is very near, I hear, my dear Gerold," said the Princess Thekla, adding salt to her soup as she spoke.

"A half-hour's drive away," Lothar replied. "If agreeable to you, I can drive you past the ruins of the convent. They are worth seeing."

"No, thank you," the old Princess coldly replied.

"No, thank you," replied the Princess Helena, as coldly.

He looked up from his plate in surprise: "Your Grace can scarcely avoid a view of the convent; our most beautiful forest road leads directly past it."

"I hope, Baron," the Princess Helena interposed, thus diverting Lothar's attention from his noble mother-in-law's nose, which was really becoming very sharp,— "I hope you will accompany me in my rides; Countess Moorsfeld joins me sometimes."

"I am at your Grace's service," he replied, glancing at the pretty face of the Countess, who with difficulty suppressed an ironical smile at the 'sometimes.' In the capital she had been obliged to join the riding-party every day, or the little Princess would not ride at all.

The Princess Thekla talked of a milk-cure which she thought of trying. On a sudden she became overpoweringly amiable, rallied Lothar upon his idyllic mode of life, and called Beata 'my dear' again and again. Never before had she tasted such delicious trout; and when Lothar arose, his glass of foaming champagne in his hand, to acknowledge the honour shown his house by this visit from his child's most

illustrious grandmamma, she graciously extended her small hand loaded with rings for him to kiss, and in token of emotion pressed her lace handkerchief to her eyes for a moment.

Upon pretence of fatigue she rose from table before dessert, and the ladies withdrew to their apartments. Frau von Berg sat for a long time at the bedside of the Princess Thekla, and when she went to her own room she did so with head erect, and added a postscript to her letter of the afternoon :

“All is admirably in train ; the little Princess is all aflame with love and—hatred : with the first for we know whom, and with the last for Claudine.

“In a few days the forest-trees will have a piece of news to tell. Meanwhile, in the beginning of next week there is to be a *fête* here ; it will be wonderfully fine. The Princess Helena is longing for a dance beneath the lindens in the garden. By the way, with all her malice, she is possessed of a certain good nature which must put us on our guard lest she should commit some folly.

“A. v. B.”

She sealed the letter and carried it down-stairs, where one of the scullery-maids received it in the dim light of the basement and with a grin pocketed a thaler. Frau von Berg paid a high postage.

From the dim sitting-room there echoed a burst of merry feminine laughter. When Beata had entered, a figure was still seated in her arm-chair on the platform by the window, writing at her work-table by the dying evening light. “But, Joachim !” she cried, in her ringing tones, “do you want to ruin your eyes ?”

He started, having quite forgotten where he was.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, rising suddenly and looking for his hat, "that old book made me forget how time was passing. Forgive me, cousin; I will vacate the premises instantly."

"Not now," she said, still laughing, "for you must see Lothar; your visit was to him, was it not?" And she gently forced him back into the arm-chair and went for her brother.

She found him at the window of his room, gazing out towards the road.

"Lothar," said she, "come to my room. Joachim is there still, having forgotten time and space over that old Spanish book of travels,—the one that was our grandfather's, bound in parchment."

"How in the world did Joachim come here?" Lothar asked, taking a cigar-case and a tray for ashes from his smoking-table.

"I found him here when I came back from the Owl's Nest, and as I could not stay with him, with all I had to attend to, and did not want to send him away until he was rested, I bethought me of that old book. You see he has been well entertained with it."

He looked at her with a smile as he walked beside her through the lighted hall and turned into the corridor.

"Tell me, Beata, did you write those words on your door when he was there, or before?"

"Before, of course," she replied, quite naturally, and then she blushed.

"Well, you know, sister," he said, with a merry glance which became his fine face wonderfully well, "people generally write 'no admittance' on the doors of rooms containing something which they wish to keep for themselves alone."

"You are an odious fellow!" said Beata, confused,

hastily passing her hand over the chalk letters. And then all three sat round the table in the pleasant room over a glass of wine, and Joachim, being moved thereto by the book, told of his travelling experiences. He talked wonderfully well. "Like music," thought Beata, sitting idly by, forgetting everything, forgetting that the wax candles in the chandelier in the dining-hall were burning to waste, forgetting even to-morrow's breakfast.

The bunch of keys at her girdle kept perfectly quiet; not the slightest jingle reminded her of her housewifely duties. The lindens outside of the windows whispered in the evening breeze, and the fragrance of new-mown hay floated into the room.

It was late when Lothar drove his cousin through the forest to the Owl's Nest. On the way back he met the Duchess's coupé. He knew whom it contained, and he passed it with furious rapidity. As he drew up before the hall door at Neuhaus a window above was closed, and within the quiet room to which it belonged a passionate young face buried itself among the pillows.

The Princess Helena had seen him drive away—in the direction of the Owl's Nest. Thank heaven he was at home again!

There was a change at the Owl's Nest. Fräulein Lindenmeyer had a visitor.

First there had been a great interchange of letters, and then, on the morning after the day when Claudine had driven with the Duchess, Fräulein Lindenmeyer made her appearance in the girl's sitting-room, her face very red and confused, and an open letter in her hand.

"Ah, Fräulein Claudine, dear, I have a great favour to ask," she began

"My dear, good Lindenmeyer, it is already granted," Claudine replied, pouring out the tea for Joachim's breakfast.

"But you must tell me frankly, Fräulein Claudine, if you think it unadvisable; I will do everything that I can to prevent any annoyance, but——"

"Only let me hear what it is, my dear Lindenmeyer," Claudine said, encouragingly. "I do not know what request of yours I could refuse, unless you should ask to leave the Owl's Nest; that I could not allow."

"I leave? Oh, Fräulein Claudine, I could not survive such a thing! Oh, no, it is not that. I expect—I am to have—to have a visitor, if you will allow me."

"Why, who is it, my dear Lindenmeyer?"

"The Frau Forester's second daughter, Ida; she needs some training, and wishes to be taught embroidery, and the Forester's wife has taken it into her head that an old thing like me can teach her. I shall be very glad to do it, with your permission. She could have the little room just back of mine, if——"

The good old soul had clasped her hands over her letter and looked at her young mistress in eager expectation.

"Why, that will be quite delightful for you," was the kind reply; "let the young girl come as soon as possible, and stay as long as she pleases."

And so the next day when Claudine betook herself to the kitchen to fulfil her duties there, she found a plump, girlish little figure already busy by the bright fire, handling pans and casseroles as if she had been there always. A pair of laughing blue eyes above a pretty little turn-up nose greeted Claudine, and their

possessor made a rather awkward courtesy as the graceful figure of the mistress of the Owl's Nest appeared.

"But, my dear child——" said Claudine, surprised.

"Ah, Fräulein von Gerold, let me do it," the girl entreated. "I cannot sit all day long with Aunt Doris and embroider; I should die if I could not do a little house-work. Please do not say no!"

"But I cannot accept your services, my dear Ida,—is not that your name? I should grow too self-indulgent."

"I should so like to learn," said the girl, with downcast eyes.

Claudine smiled: "Of me? Oh, you have come to the wrong person; I am only a learner myself."

"Dear Fräulein, let me tell the truth. I know something of housekeeping, but I am ignorant of so many other things. I should like to have a situation as lady's-maid in S., and I thought I could learn here how to dress a lady and all the rest of a maid's duties. Let me do a little house-work here, and learn sewing and a little dress-making in return."

The girl looked into Claudine's eyes with a pleading expression, and she herself felt very sad and weary, but she made no reply, only betook herself to Fräulein Lindenmeyer. "Now confess, Lindenmeyer dear," she said, forcing herself to speak in a jesting tone, and caressing the old woman as she had done in her childish days, "you invited your visitor to relieve me of the burden of the house-work?" And the tears stood in her eyes.

"Ah, my darling," the good-humoured creature replied, "Ida has betrayed us, and we had contrived it all so beautifully. Don't be angry. I cannot bear to see you come down in the morning with your eyes looking

as if you had not slept, and so pale, so pale! There is an old proverb, 'A bed of roses and ploughed land ne'er thrive when tended by one hand.' If you want to be fresh at court you must be freer from care, or your lovely complexion will show it. Heinemann says so too; he has been as anxious as I about you. And, Fräulein Claudine, it is greatly to Ida's advantage too. Her aunt could get her a situation as lady's-maid with the Countess Keller, only that she is too inexperienced. Indeed it is so," the good old soul asseverated.

And thus Claudine had an assistant in spite of her efforts to the contrary. The fresh, modest young girl brought comfort and brightness into the house. Never was a mistress more zealously served, never was a child more affectionately spoiled, than were Claudine and the little Elizabeth. Heinemann actually beamed when he met the brisk, smiling girl on the stairs, or heard her in the kitchen singing her folk-songs in an undertone, so as not to disturb the Herr Baron. Little Elizabeth no longer wept when Aunt Claudine drove away in the beautiful carriage with the Duchess, and Claudine no longer was so nervous at table that she could eat nothing.

"We are quite grand!" said Joachim, when Heinemann for the first time placed the simple viands upon the table, and Claudine sat still in her place. "I am rejoiced for your sake, sister."

Claudine had given up her journey. When she mentioned it to the Duchess her Highness burst into tears: "I cannot keep you, Claudine; go, go!" And then,

startled and touched, she promised to remain. Each day the carriage that conveyed her to Altenstein came earlier, but she was perfectly calm and serene now; she drove with the Duchess and sat with her in her boudoir reading aloud and talking. Now and then, indeed, the Duke would enter hastily unannounced, and he was always greeted with an exclamation of delight from his wife; but Claudine no longer dreaded his visits. There was never an ardent glance to encounter, he never attempted to whisper a syllable; she knew he would keep his princely word. She knew him well through his mother; many a mad prank of his had been recounted to her by the old Duchess, who had told her of the anxiety she had undergone on his behalf, of the fervent prayers she had uttered kneeling before the imaged Mother of God, above which the little silver lamp hung in her own room,—prayers that this beloved son might not go to ruin in the wild heyday of his youth. “And,” the old Duchess had added, “it was, after all, only the effervescence of youthful spirits; his heart was always true; he could be guided if he were appealed to in the right way.” And Claudine thought she had discovered the right way. Hers was one of the noble natures that never rest until they have discovered the good in a human soul; that search and search, and, when they have found the gold, know no bounds in their willingness to forgive.

She silently forgave the Duke the insult he had offered her when she saw how chivalrously he struggled with his passion, striving to be more patient with his wife than before, and how he honoured herself as the friend of this wife. As such she was sacred from either love or hatred, she grew to believe. She wrote to the Dowager Duchess alluding in heartfelt,

grateful words to her happiness in being the chosen friend of the Duchess. "I wish your Highness could know"—these were her words—"how happy I am in the love and confidence of this noble nature; I do all that I can to show my gratitude for the friendship thus accorded. Even that which your Highness has sometimes thought worthy of blame, proves upon a nearer acquaintance to be no fault. Her Highness not only frankly displays her affection for her husband, her whole being is so permeated by her love for him that she could not conceal it without hypocrisy."

Claudine seemed happier than she had been for a long time. She began to await with impatience the carriage which was to take her to Altenstein. In the intellectual atmosphere that surrounded the invalid she felt her own sorrow dwindle. One day the Duchess, with all the shyness of a school-girl, slipped into Claudine's hand some manuscripts. They contained charming verses composed by herself; first a joyous song of betrothal, then the earnest outpouring of the happiness of the young wife, and then verses written beside the cradles of her sons. They were perhaps too tender, too sentimental, but as Claudine looked at their author she thought it could not be otherwise than that they should have been inspired by intense happiness and by a presage of death.

And there were several short stories among them, unique of their kind, always portraying the fortunes of two people who loved each other beyond all else in the world, but who were parted either by death or by some cruel destiny, never by the fault of either. Claudine had been surprised by the tragic nature of all the endings, but had not ventured to speak of it, lest she

should add to the melancholy to which the Duchess was so often a prey.

Thus eight peaceful, happy days passed. The Neuhausers had not disturbed this serenity, as the Duchess had feared they would. The Princess Helena had appeared several times like a hurricane in the Duchess's apartments, but had given it to be clearly understood that she was in the greatest haste to return to the 'sweet baby' of her late sister. Meanwhile, the old Princess was laid up on a lounge at Neuhaus with a sprained ankle. Claudine saw Beata but for a moment at a time, when she came in the early morning to the Owl's Nest to inform herself as to various little Princess-habits, and to disburden herself of quantities of delicate cakes, bonbons, and confections. She approved highly of Fräulein Lindenmeyer's 'visitor,' but otherwise she was very taciturn and depressed, and in reply to Claudine's questions shrugged her shoulders rather impatiently and declared that she desired nothing so much as to be four weeks older. It was fearful, far worse than she had fancied; not a corner in the entire house was there where one could be safe from that jack-o'-lantern the Princess Helena, and Lothar only shrugged his shoulders when she complained to him.

Claudine bowed her head, as if to receive the *coup-de-grace* which would annihilate all hope, but Beata paused, and then began to tell of how Frau von Berg grew more disagreeable every day, and certainly had great influence with the old Princess. "It makes no difference to me, however," she had added.

To-day, a delicious summer day, the Duchess had ordered tea in the park, just where the forest-trees gave place to the garden; the spot where Joachim's wife had fallen asleep forever. The Duchess's hammock was

swinging, beneath an old oak, and Claudine, sitting beside her in a light bamboo easy-chair, was reading aloud. Upon the Japanese table before her lay Frau von Katzenstein's inevitable knitting: the old lady was standing on one side, busy with the tea. In the shade of a group of huge chestnuts, separated from the ladies by the breadth of the gravelled avenue, the Duke was playing at ninepins with the two older Princes, Captain von Rinkleben, and Herr von Palmer; the shouts of the children, laughter, and the noise of the tumbling pins filled the air, and the Duchess looked across at the players with a blissful expression in her eyes.

"Stop there, Claudine," she said at last. "The day is so lovely, the sunshine so golden, and that story so gloomy. It seems to me perfectly unnatural to-day. What do you think is going to happen now? I mean to the people in the book."

"I am afraid, your Highness, that it ends terribly," said the young lady, obediently putting down the volume.

"He has procured the poison," the Duchess went on.

"Yes," rejoined Claudine; "she must die."

"She?" the Duchess said, amazed. "What a horrible idea! He is going to poison himself because he feels that he cannot live with her or without the other."

"I am not sure, your Highness," the girl stammered, "but from the course of the story I suspect——"

"Give me the book!" exclaimed the Duchess. She opened it and read the close. "Good heavens, Claudine, you are right!" she said then.

"There was nothing else to be done, psychologically, if we remember the man's character as it was described——"

"It did not strike me as anything remarkable," the

Duchess interposed. "No, Claudine,—it is all false! Thank God, such fancies are the offspring of insanity. We will not go on with the book; the world is so beautiful and I am so light-hearted to-day."

She threw aside the silken coverlet spread over her simple, dotted foulard gown, and pointed to the group beneath the chestnuts.

"Look, Claudine, there comes the Duke; he is tired of playing.—Dear heart, I am too lazy to-day for our game of dominos, but perhaps Fräulein von Gerold will take my place? Please bring the table here." She turned in her hammock, and, resting her head on her hand, looked on while the Duke took his place opposite Claudine, distributed the dominos, and arranged his own.

Suddenly Claudine's slender fingers began to tremble; she bent her lovely face over her dominos, and a rosy flush mantled her cheek and brow. On the other side of the strip of lawn there was a glimmer of blue, which fluttered about like a delicate butterfly and then paused motionless. And back of this blue——?

"Ah, my child," said the Duchess, in an undertone, "you are not paying attention; the Duke will win the game."

"Oh, what an idyllic group! Watteau might have arranged it! I am afraid we shall intrude, Baron," the Princess Helena said, as, dressed in light-blue muslin, she turned, with an expression that was half sarcasm, half vexation, to where her mother was advancing leaning on the arm of her son-in-law and followed by the lady-in-waiting with her cavalier. And as she spoke she looked in Lothar's face, which showed not the slightest change of feature.

Her Grace the old Princess put up her eye-glass, and

said, composedly, "*En avant*, my child: you wanted to surprise Elizabeth. You will please to announce us."

Princess Helena advanced, but she no longer fluttered gayly; she walked slowly and her face wore a discontented expression. She closed her parasol noisily as she neared the old oak-tree and paused with a pout. "Excuse me, your Highness, if I intrude——"

The Duchess looked up and laughed. "Where did you come from, you gypsy?" she asked, holding out her hand. "Did you fly over the wall, or——"

"In a carriage from Neuhaus. Mamma, Baron Gerold, and the rest are there behind the trees, and request permission to pay their respects."

She bowed gracefully to the Duke, kissed the Duchess's hand, and then, appearing not to notice Claudine, who stood by, she began to wave her parasol with comic zeal, as if to notify the visitors that they were welcome.

The Duke went to meet the old Princess, and conducted her to his wife. While greetings were interchanging, Lothar happened to stand beside Claudine, but in vain did she look for a word from him; she received only a silent bow. All seated themselves, and a lively conversation ensued among the illustrious ladies. Princess Thekla excused herself for her delay in inquiring for her Highness's health, but she had slipped upon the Neuhaus staircase and had been obliged to sit with her foot on a rest for six long days; and Princess Helena's visits had been so short; there was no driving her from the nursery, or from Neuhaus itself; she had even borrowed a linen apron from Fräulein Beata, and had run about with her in garret, pantry, and cellar. And as she spoke the old Princess archly shook her forefinger at her daughter. "Yesterday I caught her in the kitchen, where they were

preserving raspberries. Yes, yes, try to hide your stained fingers."

The Duchess turned to the Princess Thekla with a smile: "And how is the little grand-daughter?"

"Well, it is recovering," the old lady replied, ungraciously; "but not as it should. Our good Berg followed perhaps too implicitly the directions of the physician whom the Baron employs,—never any medicine, but cool bathing, and fresh air all day long; the child is far too delicate for such treatment. It is taking aconite now as a preservative against cold, and is kept in the nursery until noon."

"My little daughter is just beginning to walk," the Baron added, composedly; "and as she has attained the normal size of a young lady two years old, she clambers about by the sofas and chairs——"

"Not as much as she should," the Princess Thekla interrupted.

"I am quite satisfied with the little that she does," he rejoined.

Meanwhile, Claudine turned kindly to the Countess Moorsleben and addressed a few remarks to her. A couple of monosyllables, while the young lady's merry brown eyes looked in another direction, were the sole reply.

Claudine, surprised, fell silent. The little Princess, in a rocking-chair opposite her, stared at her provokingly for a while. Claudine's beautiful brown eyes looked calmly and half inquiringly into those bold, black stars, whereupon the dark, curly head was turned away, and a contemptuous smile hovered upon the rather too ripe lips.

"The young ladies ought to have a game of croquet," the Duchess proposed. "I am sure those gen-

tlemen will gladly take part in it. My dear Claudine, please show the Princess and Countess Moorsleben the way to the ground, and have the hoops set out."

Claudine rose.

"Excuse me, your Highness. No, I thank you," said Helena; "I am rather tired." She leaned her head back in the rocking-chair and slowly rocked herself. Countess Moorsleben sat down again when her mistress refused, and Claudine quietly took her place once more.

Ices and tea and coffee were served. The gentlemen came over from where they had been playing and joined the ladies; Claudine was suddenly aware of two of them behind her chair, Herr von Palmer and Captain von Rinkleben. She soon entered into conversation with the latter; she had known his younger sister at school, and now asked after her. He gave a long account of her marriage, and of the happiness she had found in it, contrary to all expectation. Very moderate means, a small income, and yet she was perfectly contented and happy.

"Oh, yes," said Claudine; "with a little content the smallest home can be charmingly decorated."

"Fräulein Claudine herself is a striking example of what she is saying," Palmer interposed. "The Owl's Nest is an idyl, a dream, Fräulein Claudine, where you reign as a fairy of comfort. True, the consciousness that it is only an episode helps to complete the charm. It is easy to be contented when one beholds a temple of happiness in the distance."

Claudine looked at him inquiringly. He smiled familiarly, and took a glass goblet of ice from the table at his side.

"You are obscure, Herr von Palmer; I do not understand you," said Claudine.

"Really? Ah, Fräulein von Gerold, with your brilliant intellect that is scarcely to be credited. It must seem very home-like to you here," he went on, as if changing the subject. "Probably the time is not far distant when you will return definitely to your ancestral home. The perpetual drives to and from the Owl's Nest are, after all, tiresome, and will be specially so during the approaching festivities at Altenhaus and Neuhaus."

"I am unfortunate to-day, Herr von Palmer; again I do not catch the point of your remarks."

"Then look upon his words as prophetic, Fräulein von Gerold," said a clear young voice, and the hereditary Prince, an ideally handsome lad of twelve years, with his mother's large, sparkling eyes, pushed his chair over beside Claudine. "Prophets always speak obscurely," he added.

"Bravo, your Highness!" exclaimed Herr von Palmer, laughing.

"I wish Herr von Palmer might be a true prophet," the lad continued, looking with the frank, bold admiration of his years at the beautiful girl. "You ought to come and live with mamma, Fräulein von Gerold. She said to papa, yesterday, that it would be so pleasant if you never had to drive away."

Herr von Palmer continued to smile.

"Unfortunately, that cannot be, your Highness; I have duties at home," Claudine replied, quietly, "or how gladly would I come to my dear Altenstein!"

"It is a delightful property," the captain remarked. "Such a wonderful garden!"

"It was my grandfather's hobby," Claudine observed, sadly.

"You used to play here at 'robbers and princess'

with your brother and other children when you were little, did you not?" asked the Prince, without taking his eyes from her face.

"Down there," she nodded, pointing towards the left, "by the low gate-way in the wall; it was used as a sally-port."

"Captain," Princess Helena called aloud, "I should like a game of croquet, after all. Come, Isidora."

The Countess and the captain arose and hastened towards the croquet-grounds. Princess Helena still lingered. "Baron," she said to Lothar, and there was a shade of entreaty in her voice, "will you not play?"

He rose and looked at her as he bowed an assent. "Has your Grace asked all who are to take part in the game?" he inquired.

"Of course; we are two against two."

"No more than four? Ah, indeed! Your Highness,"—he turned to the young Prince,—“Princess Helena wishes to play croquet. I know how you love the game.”

Her Grace's little foot tapped the ground impatiently.

"I am sorry," the Prince replied, gravely, "but Fräulein von Gerold has just promised to show me a spot where I can build a fortress with my brother. I am much more interested in that."

Baron Lothar smiled. He stood still for a moment watching the young Prince, who offered Claudine his arm with a charming air of importance.

The Duchess looked after the pair with surprise. "Why does not Fräulein von Gerold join the game?" she asked the Baron.

"Princess Helena, your Highness, made up the party who were to play," he replied.

"Pray, Baron," the Duchess said, gently, but very decidedly, "go to your cousin and tell her how sorry I

am that they *forgot* to invite her to play, and bring her back with you, if possible. The Prince's tutor, whom I see approaching, will supply your place in the game while you are absent."

The Baron bowed, and departed to excuse himself to the Princess and to resign his mallet to the tutor, an amiable but shy man. Then slowly and by a round-about path he went to seek his cousin.

The old Princess's nose during this episode suddenly grew sharp and white.

"Pardon me, your Highness," said she, putting her delicate cup down noisily on the table, "Helena certainly had no idea of offending; she means well, and loves your Highness dearly. Her honest heart carries her away, and——"

"I really cannot see what honesty has to do with it, dearest aunt," rejoined the Duchess, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

Herr von Palmer looked across at the Duke, who took not the slightest notice of this conversation. His Highness was playing with his eye-glass as he gazed gravely after the white, graceful figure of the girl upon whose arm the Prince was hanging familiarly, asking her all sorts of questions. They had disappeared for some time in a thicket of jessamines, when the Duke slowly turned his head and encountered the eyes of the Princess Thekla; they looked brighter than usual, and there was an expression of suppressed malice upon her sharp features.

"He plays the lover early," the Duke observed. "The boy is all fire and flame."

"And he has good taste, too," said the Duchess, entering merrily into the jest.

"That he gets from his papa," the old Princess inter-

posed, in her shrill voice, and for a moment the innocent smile of the woman of the world displaced the suppressed malice in her face as she sat erect in her chair.

The Duke courteously took off his hat and made her a low bow: "Yes, my revered aunt, I have always preferred to look at a handsome woman rather than at an ugly one, and if you think the Prince has inherited this propensity from me, you make me very happy. I thank you."

Herr von Palmer's sharply-cut features quivered with suppressed merriment. It was delicious! if the Berg could only hear it! Princess Thekla plucked nervously at the lace of her pocket-handkerchief; the Duchess cast an appealing glance at her husband,—she was perfectly aware of his antipathy for Aunt Thekla. It dated from his boyhood, when the said aunt, who had a distinguished talent for espionage, followed up his mad pranks for the sake of detailing them to the Dowager Duchess; of course not always quite truthfully. She now deigned no further word to the Duke; she turned to the Duchess, and overwhelmed her with exaggerated expressions of affection,—expressions tinged with a kind of compassion, such as one uses towards those who, innocent themselves, are called to bear some great sorrow, and which are calculated to put to the torture nervous, proud natures.

The Duchess did not understand her, but she suffered keenly from all her questions, observations, and advice, and when at last Princess Thekla sighed, "If I were only convinced that this Altenstein were really doing you good!" she grew impatient, and asked to be conducted to her room, as she was tired.

This was the signal for the departure of the guests.

In a short time the place beneath the oak was deserted, the gay croquet-balls lay about under the trees, and the two Princesses were rolling along the forest road towards Neuhaus with those who had accompanied them to Altenstein.

Claudine, with the young Prince, had sought the deepest recesses of the park. She was glad at heart to escape from Lothar's eyes; the intentional slight on the part of the little Princess had scarcely offended her; it was so perfectly childish that she thought it hardly worthy of notice. There had always been a certain ill will displayed towards her in that quarter; it dated from balls and other festivities at court, when Claudine had quite involuntarily thrown the little Princess into the background. Why Helena should have chosen to testify her dislike to-day in so striking a manner, and in the presence of the Duke and the Duchess, she could not conceive. Her small Grace must have been in a very bad humour, or—could she, with the clear insight of love, have suspected Claudine's sentiments towards the man whose affection she coveted? No, that could not be. The Princess was sure of her ground,—so sure that she could borrow Beata's apron and play the housewife in her future home.

And Lothar, too, must be secure in the possession of that inconstant, coquettish little heart; else how could he have allowed himself to recall her ironically to a sense of her rudeness?

The girl suddenly wrinkled her brow and bit her lip. What right had *he* to notice what happened to

her? He never would have done so had she not borne the name of Gerold. That insane pride of family! She surely knew how to defend her own dignity, how to take care of herself; she needed no guardianship, no sympathy, least of all from him.

She had reached, with her youthful companion, the extreme end of the park, where, even in her childhood, the trees and bushes were allowed to grow as they pleased. It was a damp, mossy, fragrant nook, through which rippled a little brook, its banks clothed with a rich abundance of feathery ferns. Beneath the little birchen bridge the water bubbled and gurgled, just as it had been wont to do when she had played here as a child. There stood the half-ruined but which had done duty in her plays both as a dungeon and as a knightly stronghold; how often she had sat within it as an imprisoned châtelaine! Melancholy oppressed her as she told it all to the Prince. There too was the gravestone beneath which lay Joachim's favourite, the little yellow beagle Lola, who was so clever a little dog that she never betrayed his hiding-place when they were all at play, but would be quiet as a mouse by his side while the rest were searching near. Those were happy times,—whither had they gone?

"Where does that lead to?" asked the Prince, pointing to a low door in the wall.

"To the village," Claudine replied. "By that door the servants used to go to church on Sundays."

The curious Prince drew the girl still farther along the path by the wall, plying her with all kinds of questions. Suddenly he perceived a jay in one of the tall trees, and, forgetting his companion and the courtesy due to her, he ran after it. The bird flew from branch to branch, luring the boy on, appearing here

and vanishing there, until both disappeared among the trees.

Claudine sauntered on, lost in melancholy memories, for a while before she perceived that she was alone. She sighed and passed her handkerchief over her eyes. What did she desire? All was as it had been. Tears and regret will not restore what is lost, nor will weeping and wailing avail to alter heaven's decrees. "The time must come when the pain will be soothed," she said to herself; "it must come; no one could live with a heart so wounded and torn."

She stood still; the tears gathered in her eyes. Now that she was alone, the misery that she felt in his presence asserted itself; she knew that she could not endure to see him calmly smiling beside another woman, the acknowledged lover of a superficial, wayward girl.

"Excuse me, cousin;" his voice suddenly broke the stillness. She turned in positive terror; a shining drop fell upon her hand, which she hastily covered with the other, while the old haughty expression appeared on her beautiful face.

"I should not have ventured to disturb you," he continued, approaching her, "but that her Highness commissioned me to tell you how much she regretted your having been rudely treated."

"Her Highness is always kind," was the cool reply. "I did not mind it; one learns to overlook such trifles and to judge according to desert."

"You appear to have learned much of late, cousin," he said, bitterly, walking on beside her. "I remember the time when you avoided every glance like a timid fawn,—it does not seem to me so long ago,—in the capital."

"True," she replied; "the weak are roused to sudden

strength by the knowledge that they must act for themselves. Besides, I am twenty-three years old, cousin, and have lately been forcibly awakened from the old girlish existence."

"There is something of grandeur in the pride of a woman's soul," he rejoined, not without irony; "the pity is that the first shock that life brings can shatter this pride so easily. It always touches me," he continued, "to see a woman, ignorant of the world, and with a courage beyond compare, take up an untenable position. I feel like shutting my eyes lest I should behold her failure, but I cannot; I would fain snatch her from the brink of the dizzy abyss, but I encounter only a cool, smiling repulse."

"There may perhaps exist a woman who, in addition to sufficient courage, possesses strength enough to maintain her position," said Claudine, trembling with emotion and quickening her pace.

"Possibly," he replied, with a shrug. "There are natures which regard themselves as exceptional. 'This I can venture,' they say, 'with impunity.' Their destruction is all the more complete."

"Do you think so?" she asked, calmly. "Well, there are natures which have such faith in themselves that they can pursue the path pointed out to them by duty and conscience without looking to the right or to the left, and without paying any heed to uncalled-for advice."

"Uncalled-for?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, and her beautiful eyes flashed. "What right have you, Baron Gerold, to force upon me, as soon as you see me, your mysterious wisdom, your ambiguous sarcasms? Have our relations with each other ever been such as to warrant a like guardianship on your part?"

"Never," he replied, dejectedly.

"And they never will be such," she continued, with bitterness. "I can, however, for your satisfaction, assure you that the name of Gerold—the sole object of your anxiety—shall never suffer through me, for—I know my duty." She had turned pale.

She quickened her steps still more; he fell back, overtaking her at the gardener's trim dwelling, where Heinemann's only daughter lived with her husband. Claudine stopped by the open window; behind the white curtains Heinemann's pretty grand-daughter was sitting crying as if her heart would break, and her mother, a neat, good-looking woman, came out to see her former young mistress, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron.

"Her 'Schatz' has thrown her off to-day, Fräulein Claudine," she explained.

"But why?" Claudine asked, compassionately, controlling her own agitation.

"It is her own fault, Fräulein Claudine," the woman began, mournfully, courtesying to the Baron; "the young master on the estate where she is at service has been running after her and flattering her, and Wilhelm thought she was false."

"That is very unjust of Wilhelm," said Claudine.

"Ah, Fräulein Claudine," the woman rejoined, "you can't blame him. I know she is good, for I know my child, but a young man like him—— Lisette ought to have left her place, as I advised, and then this never would have happened. You see, Herr Baron," she continued, with another awkward courtesy to Herr von Gerold, "no one will believe it; 'tis the way of the world. She might cry her eyes out and nobody will believe that she has done no wrong. I've thought so

often to-day of the verse which my gracious lady, your grandmother, Fräulein Claudine, wrote in my hymn-book on my confirmation day. Here it is." And she reached inside the window and brought out a book bound in black with gilt-edged leaves, which she opened and handed to Claudine. "There, just under the Herr Pastor's verse."

Claudine took the book. There was written first, in delicate masculine characters, 'Blessed are the pure in heart,' and beneath it, in the old Baroness's energetic handwriting,—

'Purity not alone you need :
Pure you must *seem* in word and deed.'

The book trembled in Claudine's hand ; she returned it without a word.

"Let him go, my child,"—Lothar's voice sounded strangely hard,—“he would make a very disagreeable husband, with a tendency to be jealous and to preach morals to you.”

The girl sprang to her feet: “No, no! he was so dear and good; I cannot live if he does not come back to me.”

“We can live through much, little one,” he said, kindly. “It is not easy to die of disappointed expectations.”

Claudine had nodded gravely to the girl,—she was still very pale. “Good-bye, Lisbeth,” she said, “and do not grieve for one who does not trust you.”

“Ah, Fräulein Claudine, do not say that!” the girl exclaimed, and hurried away from the window.

Claudine turned and walked on with Lothar at her side. Her grandmother's words flamed before her eyes and cast a bewildering light upon her own position.

What if people were already gossiping and whispering about her? And if such gossip should be credited? What if one of all others believed that she had been false to her honour? She suddenly looked up at him with pleading inquiry in her eyes.

He was walking quietly beside her. No,—no,—no! The fancy was an insane one!

"The place is deserted," he observed; "they seem to have gone into the house."

In fact, no one was to be seen beneath the oak save a footman, who was clearing away the tables and chairs, and who informed them that the guests had returned to Neuhaus, and that her Highness was expecting Fräulein von Gerold in her room. The carriage would return from Neuhaus.

Claudine turned towards the house. The setting sun gilded the tips of the trees, and kindled to a flame the numerous windows in the front of the old gray stone mansion. A rosy hue tinged the atmosphere; the vesper bell could be heard from the neighbouring village.

"Good-bye," said Lothar, pausing. "I should like to find his Highness, to take leave of him; you are familiar with these paths, and can surely forego my guidance." He made her a low bow,—ironically low, she thought.

She inclined her head haughtily. She knew well that the slight tie of kinship which in the seclusion of country life had superficially drawn them together had been sundered, sundered irrevocably, when she had declined 'uncalled-for advice.' Had she been too harsh? She hesitated a moment before going farther, and then walked with redoubled speed along the path leading to the principal avenue.

At a turning the Duke suddenly confronted her. He took off his hat, and, holding it in his hand, walked beside her, talking of the laying out of the park, and pointing out a magnificent group of copper-beeches, which contrasted effectively with the light green of the larches behind them. "Where did you leave the Baron, Fräulein von Gerold?" he then asked.

"My cousin left me only a minute ago," she replied. "If I do not mistake, he was going to look for your Highness, to take leave of you."

"Ah! Well, he can easily find me. I have a plan, besides, for keeping him here this evening,—to have a game of billiards. My capricious little cousin must be punished." He smiled as he spoke, and looked keenly at Claudine. "I hope you were not wounded by her childishness?" he asked, walking beside her in the broad avenue leading to the castle.

"No, your Highness," Claudine replied, looking towards the castle with a frown.

On the steps in front of it two gentlemen were standing talking; one had just said to the other, "By Jove, captain, look there, if you wish to see Louis the Fourteenth desirous of showing his respect for the La Vallière!"

He who was thus addressed made no reply, but looked with a puzzled expression at the couple approaching with such apparent good understanding.

Above, from the window of the balcony, a white kerchief was waved, and the Duchess's wasted face appeared smiling behind the panes.

The gentlemen bowed as they moved aside to allow the Duke and Claudine to pass. She looked strangely, the Duchess's beautiful friend; there were hard lines about the mouth which was wont to be so lovely, and

she ascended the staircase as slowly and wearily as if she were carrying a heavy burden. "Now all is over," she repeated to herself, as she walked through the antechamber to the apartment of the Duchess.

"Claudine!" she cried, turning from the window, where she had been impatiently awaiting her favourite, and throwing her arms about the girl's neck. "You have been away so long! When you left me I grew impatient immediately: I should have liked to go after you. I really cannot live without you. Do you hear, Claudine?"

She drew the girl down beside her lounge in the shade of the red curtains, and looked into the melancholy blue eyes.

"Poor, dear heart! you were wounded; the child was naughty and must be punished. It is the old story of the goose, who when with the swan can attract attention only by its loud cackling. Claudine," she whispered, "I saw again how high above all the rest you are!" She pressed the girl's cool hand. "I love you so dearly! Ah, Claudine, when we are alone together I pray you to call me Elizabeth. Do I ask too much?"

"Your Highness!" stammered Claudine.

"Not 'Highness,' Claudine. How can I call you Claudine if you call me 'your Highness'? I must be 'Elizabeth' to you. Ah, please, please! I have never had any one who could be to me what you are! Let me be sure that you are my friend; forget the Duchess when we are alone together, and remember that I am to you only Elizabeth, who loves you dearly."

Claudine kneeled beside the gentle invalid. She would fain have said, "Let me go! let me go! It is better for both of us that I should go from you as

far as my feet can carry me." But such words she could not utter beneath the gaze of the feverishly-brilliant eyes looking so pleadingly into her own; and then a kiss closed her mouth, and the next instant she felt something cool upon her arm, and a bracelet sparkled there in shape like a horseshoe, the nails being represented by sapphires and diamonds.

"Will your Highness—will you, Elizabeth," she corrected herself, and her tears flowed—"never repent your choice of a friend?" Her face was pale and grave as she asked the question.

"I have a true perception, Claudine, of human worth; I know that she upon whom I have bestowed my affection is not unworthy."

The Princess Helena returned to Neuhaus in a very bad humour. During the drive thither she had sat silent in one corner of the landau, and the Princess Thekla had been as silent in hers. Countess Moorsleben, who was in attendance, with difficulty suppressed a smile, there was such a resemblance between the old and the young countenance at such moments of vexation.

When the apartments up-stairs at Neuhaus were reached, the storm burst, and upon the head of Frau von Berg, who was summoned to the little Princess's room. The young lady heaped her with the most insane reproaches, as if it were her fault that four hundred years previously an old Gerold had taken it into his head to build here in the country a strong castle which had to-day become this detestable Altenstein. It was a horrible residence, a positive desert; it was

as clear as daylight that no man of sense would ever have purchased such a tasteless domain unless with 'views' of a special description.

"Was ever such a thing heard of as that I should be publicly reproved by her Highness because of—because of such a——" Her rage could not find fitting words. "All that was wanting was that the Princess Helena should have to beg pardon of her Highness's lady-in-waiting!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Frau von Berg, who had bowed her head beneath this tempest; "'beg pardon'? What had your Grace done?"

"Simply not seen her, for I cannot endure her!" the Princess declared.

Frau von Berg's eyes gleamed.

"Oh, your Grace, do not say so," she said, gently. "Her Highness is infatuated with this friend; one might almost suppose the lovely Claudine guilty of brewing love-philtres in her old Owl's Nest. How disagreeable a scene it must have been for the Baron!"

"Disagreeable? Do you think so, Alice? He showed no unwillingness to follow his cousin, at her Highness's request, to soothe her and bring her back to the croquet-ground."

After these words the Princess sprang up from her chintz-covered arm-chair and ran to the window. Frau von Berg saw her clinch both hands and tap the floor nervously with her foot, as if scarcely able to control herself.

"What else could he do, your Grace?" said Frau von Berg. "But, to be sure, it is not impossible; who can understand a man's heart?" And she smiled behind the back of the Princess, who, turning sharply at her words as if a viper had stung her, saw the smile

upon her confidante's lips. The next moment a small object flew past Frau von Berg's carefully-dressed head and fell on the ground beside the porcelain stove. It proved to be nothing more than the soft work-bag holding her Grace's embroidery, which never was more than begun; but the fact remained the same,—it had been thrown at Frau von Berg's head.

Much grieved, she put her handkerchief up to her eyes and began to sob.

"Stop crying!" the little Princess said, imperiously. "You know it drives me wild to—— I know you well, Alice; you smiled maliciously."

"Great heavens, no!" the weeping woman rejoined. "I was thinking; I smiled compassionately."

"I do not want your compassion."

"Who could fancy that it was bestowed upon your Grace? I pity the Duchess; she seems to me like the lamb who invited the wolf to be his guest. Her Highness idolizes this Claudine, and—— Ah, your Grace, it would be ridiculous, were it not so sad, to see any one feeding with sugar-plums a bitter enemy."

The Princess made no reply. She was seated on the broad window-sill, behind the chintz curtain; her feet moved incessantly, while her eager eyes never left the small piece of road visible on the other side of the park.

"How can I help it if people are blind?" she said at last.

"I thought your Grace loved the Duchess?"

"Yes; she is good and childlike, and has always been fond of me. But mamma says she is overstrained, and I am sure she showed it plainly enough to-day. I can do nothing for her."

The clock that stood on top of the antique cupboard struck seven. The Princess noticed it with impatience.

"So late already?" she said. "The Baron forgets that we were to select a place in the garden for dancing at the *fête*."

"Perhaps her Highness has requested his attendance in her drawing-room," Frau von Berg observed. "Fräulein von Gerold sings there every evening, and the Baron is, as your Grace knows, passionately fond of music."

"But the Duchess knows that he has guests!" the Princess exclaimed, with flashing eyes and a menacing glance at her tormentor.

"But if her Highness commands?" was the rejoinder, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

"Commands? We do not live in the Middle Ages. My cousin might finally *command* him to marry her favourite."

Frau von Berg chimed in with this rather grim jest with the most innocent air in the world: "Who knows, your Grace,—if it were the wish of that favourite?"

This was too much for the little Princess. She ran across the room and angrily seized Frau von Berg by the shoulders; her face was quite pale.

"Alice," said she, "you are a wicked woman; I feel that you are wicked; you would like to torture me. What you say is horrible, but it is not impossible. Alice, I never have a peaceful moment. I wish I were dead, like my sister. She was at least happy once in her life."

"But, your Grace,—a mere jest."

"No, no; it is no jest. For God's sake do not make a jest of it! I do not know what I could not do with delight if she were away from here! Why did she not go with the Dowager Duchess to Switzerland? Why must she stay here?"

"Yes, why?" asked Frau von Berg, kissing Helena's hand. "Poor child!" she sighed.

"Ah, Alice, can you not think of some way? Tell me of one. I cannot endure this uncertainty any longer!" whispered the passionate girl.

"Ah, your Grace, what can I do? Unless some chance should open her Highness's eyes."

"Some chance?" the Princess repeated, bitterly.

"How else? There is no single soul sufficiently devoted to her Highness to do her so kind a service."

"Wonderfully kind it would be!" the Princess rejoined, sarcastically. "Why, it would be work for an executioner, Alice, for I believe as truly as that I stand here that the knowledge of the truth in this affair would break Elizabeth's heart."

"Your Grace would rather look on and see the noblest and best of human beings systematically deceived? I must confess that our views as to what constitutes friendship differ widely," replied Frau von Berg, reproachfully.

"Did you never love any one so very dearly, Alice,—so very dearly that you would rather have died than lose them? But you need not answer; I know you never did. Where others have a heart you have only a vacant place. Do not look at me so; the Duchess shall never be enlightened by me, Alice. Moreover, I never assert what I do not know positively, and here satisfactory proof is lacking."

Frau von Berg smiled and stroked the Princess's hair, while a tear glittered in her eye.

"How could a heart of such childlike purity believe in such guilt?" she said, softly. "It would not admit the proofs to be such."

The Princess shook off her hand. "Pray do not

“speak so,—as if you had your pockets full of them,” she said, annoyed at being touched.

“My pockets are not full of them, ’tis true; one proof suffices for me, your Grace.”

The young Princess’s face was dyed with a burning blush. “It is not true,” she stammered. “No woman is so destitute of honour as to feign friendship where she is practising treachery. You are terrible, Alice!”

“Oh, your Grace does not know the world.”

The Princess suddenly put her hand to her forehead and ran into her bedroom; the door closed with a crash behind her fairy figure. Frau von Berg was left alone in her comfortable apartment. She looked towards the door, and a smile hovered upon her lips. Then she took from her pocket a note, which she contemplated affectionately. “Here it is,” she whispered. It had already exercised its magic power. In her boudoir her Grace the Princess Thekla was writing to her Highness the Dowager Duchess a letter filled with virtuous indignation.

In the next room passionate sobs were audible. Frau von Berg left her apartment, to return immediately with fresh water and raspberry syrup, after which she unceremoniously entered Helena’s bedroom. “Your Grace must compose yourself,” she gently entreated as she mixed the cooling drink. She kneeled beside the weeping young creature, who was seated upon the lounge at the foot of the bed. “We must bathe these eyes,” she went on. “If I am not mistaken, the Baron has just driven into the court-yard. The pictures of costumes for the fancy *fête* are on the table, with a number of exquisite patterns from M. Ulmont.”

The Princess rose, and allowed Frau von Berg to

arrange her hair and bathe her eyes. "Do I look as if I had been crying?" she asked.

"No, no; charming as ever," was the reply.

The dinner-bell sounded clearly from below, and a few minutes afterwards the Princess flew down-stairs, as if eager to lose no second of a delightful hour; her eyes sparkled, a smile parted her lips. At the open doors of the dining-hall, in which candles were lighting up the shining table, stood Beata in the rustling gray-and-black-striped silk which she now regularly donned for dinner.

"My brother begs your Grace to excuse his absence; his Highness requested his attendance, and the carriage has just returned without him," she said, with a slight courtesy, and in the hard voice which she could use at will.

The delight in the Princess's face faded; she sat silent beside Beata. The old Princess remained in her room on the plea of a sudden attack of headache. Countess Moorsleben with difficulty suppressed a yawn; the chamberlain conversed in an undertone with Frau von Berg, otherwise there was not a sound except the low clatter of the plates, or Beata's voice as loud and clear as ever. Once she addressed the Princess, who looked at her without replying, and before the dessert was served rose, and, signing to the Countess to stay where she was, ran out into the garden like a wayward child. When she returned to her room a couple of hours afterwards, her hair was damp with dew and her eyes were swollen. These eyes did not see what was actually before them; what they perceived was a spacious apartment, where at the grand piano was seated a beautiful girl, about whose fair hair the candle-light threw a halo. And as she sang one listened

whose heart was enthralled against his will by the soft, sweet tones. Oh, it was enough to drive one mad!

"Send Frau von Berg here," she said to the maid, "and do not light the candles."

A few minutes afterwards the stately woman's train rustled across the threshold of the dark room, and the Princess's trembling little hand sought Frau von Berg's.

"The proof, Alice,—give it to me," was whispered, in faltering accents.

"Here," the lady replied, coolly, and put the treacherous note into the extended hand. "It is scarcely worth the trouble of reading. Throw it away, your Grace, when you have read it."

"Thank you, Alice; you can go now."

The Princess went into her bedroom and read by the light of the hanging-lamp. "In spite of this a friend? Poor Liesel!" she whispered. She made as if she would tear up the note, but paused. The blood rushed to her head; she breathed heavily. The room was still pervaded by the sultriness of the day; through the open window came the sweet intoxicating fragrance of the linden-blossoms, intoxicating as the yearning for happiness that filled the girl's heart. She would grasp this happiness at any price, even at the greatest! With trembling fingers she folded the note as small as possible and shut it up in a little golden case which she wore around her neck. It contained the miniature of a man; she had secretly taken it from her sister when that sister was betrothed to Lothar. It was her most profound secret.

"Only in case of necessity," she whispered, as she concealed the medallion again.

Fräulein Lindenmeyer shook her head amazed in its red-ribboned cap. The change that had come over the Paulinenthal, hitherto so lonely and deserted, was marvellous indeed! Gay dresses enlivened all the woodland paths, and merry voices resounded; it seemed as if the entire city had chosen this special part of the country for its picnics. Numerous were the elegant equipages that had lately driven past the Owl's Nest, and in the neighbouring village there was not an egg to be had. Everything was absorbed by B——, the tiny watering-place a few leagues distant, which, according to the forester's wife, swarmed with guests this year. Even the smallest cottages in the place were rented, and the host of 'The Trout' was ready to burst with pride; he had two Counts with their families in his first story, and his back rooms had been taken by a Frau von Steinbrunn with two daughters, and every one had a carriage, and there was a perpetual driving to Altenstein and Neuhaus.

Yes, the swarm of courtiers had followed the reigning family as the tail with its myriad bobs follows the kite. This year the first society of the capital discovered the incomparable beauty of their own mountains, so different from Switzerland or the Tyrol, from Ostend or Norderney. Those who had left this part of the country returned to it. There was much eager animation in the primitive dining-room of the B—— inn, where the portraits of the Duke and Duchess in staring colours adorned the whitewashed walls, where they sat on pine chairs at small tables and ate very dry veal cutlets, with baked plums for a compote, and drank doubtful red wine. Was there not a prospect of picnics in the forest? of croquet and lawn-tennis in the Altenstein park? The Duchess was said to have talked of

a *bal champêtre*,—a fancy ball in the moonlight beneath the oaks of the castle garden.

This summer season promised an uncommon amount of enjoyment in all directions; in addition to the rest there was this extremely interesting and romantic friendship between her Highness and the beautiful Claudine to discuss; the most marvellous things were told about it.

"They must be extremely intimate," said the Countess X.

"They appeared lately dressed exactly alike," Frau von Steinbrunn remarked.

"Pardon me, that is not the case. The Duchess wore red ribbons and Claudine von Gerold blue," was the eager correction of a young officer in civilian's clothes, who was spending his leave here instead of at Wiesbaden.

"They say the Duchess actually heaps her with jewels and trinkets; they are together all day long, reading, walking, and talking; they probably write verses together. The Princess Helena told Isidora Moorsleben the day before yesterday that they called each other by their first names," said the Countess Pansewitz.

"Impossible! Incredible!"

"The Gerolds are excessively lucky."

"What does his Highness say to it all?" the pert voice of a youthful diplomatist was suddenly heard to ask.

An old Excellency with a white head and a dignified aspect at the head of the table cleared his throat and shook his head disapprovingly.

People smiled and looked at one another significantly, silently sipping their wine, and passing around once

more the plates of fruit which had before been declined. His Excellency's wife began after a pause to talk of the weather. A couple of Countess-mammas, with a glance towards their daughters, instantly made rejoinder, and wondered whether it would be fine enough to climb to the 'lookout,' one of the best points for a view in all the country round. And when dinner was over the elder ladies got together in a group and whispered, and shrugged their shoulders, and put their handkerchiefs up to their mouths to hide their smiles.

Hitherto no one had been able to see and judge for herself, for until now all who had called at Altenstein in their concern for the Duchess's health had been obliged to content themselves with inscribing their names in the book that lay open in one of the rooms on the ground-floor of the castle. But there were reports flying about; people suspected and looked wise. All were looking forward to the next Thursday, for it might be confidently asserted that the royal party would be present at Baron Gerold's *fête*, when surely a certain event was to take place,—nothing less than the announcement of a long-expected betrothal.

Yes, it would be very interesting. And while all these suspicions and expectations were rife, the inmates of Altenstein and Neuhaus pursued their various ways, apparently undisturbed by them.

The Princess Helena was sitting in the garden at Neuhaus, and beside her stood little Leonie's very elegant perambulator. Her Grace played the part of devoted aunt after the same stormy fashion in which

she carried out everything that it came into her head to do. She dragged the little girl about with her everywhere; she was indefatigable in her persevering efforts to teach her beloved niece the word 'papa'; but the shy black eyes stared at her, while the wayward little mouth kept tight closed. Her Grace was not aware that even the youngest child soon learns to read the faces of those about it, and that the impatience and passion of her glance frightened the poor little creature. It usually began to scream after a little while spent with its aunt. And then it was hugged and carried, soothed and kissed, with a fervour of affection, and loaded with extravagant terms of endearment, until Beata wrung her hands as she listened in her own room, longing to have some one come to the aid of the poor little thing. But who could? Lothar sat as if immured in his study, whither he usually betook himself when the meals were ended. The Princess Thekla reclined on her lounge, yawning, or wrote letters; and Frau von Berg—well, she only confirmed the Princess Helena in her extravagance; the tall, arrogant woman actually grovelled in the dust before her childish mistress.

The old nurse, who usually appeared on the scene in a fright, was made use of to quiet the sweet darling sufficiently to allow of her being handed over to her aunt again until she should begin to scream afresh. Beata, who had never known until now what it meant to have nerves, experienced at this time an extraordinary tingling in her finger-ends; her ears, she affirmed, burned continually, and once she even found herself on the verge of tears. It was before the *fête*, when Lothar declared that it was a matter of perfect indifference to him how she arranged it. There she was, never having had anything in her life to do with

such matters, left to attend to the programme for the concert, the order of the dances, and the cotillon. She came very near going to the man pacing his cool, dark room to and fro so silently and so lost in thought and telling him the wholesome truth: "You are the master of this house, and if you invite guests here you ought to have the patience necessary for the part of host."

But before she opened her lips he turned to her a face so pale and so distressed that she was startled. She had been so busy of late that she had not observed him.

"Mercy upon us, Lothar!" she said, approaching him, "are you ill?"

"No, no!"

"Then you are worried."

"Worried as a man must be who has laden a frail vessel with all that he possesses, his every hope for the future, and who sees it far from shore, at the mercy of the waves and the tempest, while he stands powerless to save, and knows that its ruin means misery and despair!" he said, in a low tone.

"But, Lothar!" exclaimed Beata, dismayed. He was not wont to speak in metaphor and with so bitter an emphasis. In what was almost a tone of entreaty she said, "Confide in me, Lothar; explain yourself. You distress me!"

"Oh, it is nothing, nothing, Beata; do not mind it; it escaped me involuntarily. All will be well when—when Neuhaus is once more quiet and lonely. Bear with me."

But his sister persisted. "Lothar," she began resolutely, although she felt a pang at her heart, "I think you men are in certain cases slow of comprehension. I believe this time that you have only to stretch out your hand."

"No, my sapient little sister, not this time," he replied. "Above my open hand another is extended, confident of victory, and, seeing this, I have quietly withdrawn my own and clinched it. Do not question me further, and let me alone, Beata."

"You are the same foolish boy you always were," she murmured, and turned away. "Good heavens! she runs after you like your Diana there." And she pointed to his dog, who sat watching Lothar's movements with eyes of affectionate intelligence.

She went out into the hall, where she frowned as she observed the Princess Helena, in a light morning-gown, followed by the Countess, descending the broad staircase to disappear in the garden. As she passed the door of Lothar's apartment the girl's black eyes rested there as if they would have pierced the oaken panels, and Beata's heart was stirred with anger. What did he mean? She could not show more plainly—she showed it far too plainly, in Beata's opinion—that he was beloved. Those bold, passionate eyes, the Princess's flighty, nervous demeanour, were inexpressibly disagreeable to her. God only knew what she had taken into her head now; cow-house and stable were as little secure from her as was the nursery, or even the family burial-vault at the other end of the park, the key to which she had lately imperiously demanded, that she might place wreaths upon the coffins of Lothar's parents,—an attention which was unfortunately entirely overlooked by their son.

Beata shook her head and went up-stairs to the large mansard room, where were the linen presses and chests. There she sat down and yielded to her desire to cry. Was it a good for which he was thus longing so desperately? That high-born, passionate creature!

Had his first marriage brought him happiness? Why did Lothar's desires soar so high? She thought of his future at Helena's side; of the forsaken home of his fathers, in which she herself would stay, alone and lonely. He would mingle again in the whirl of life in the capital, travel, as he had been wont to do with the first wife, and now and then come hither for a couple of days—alone! What could his high-born wife do here? Her presence here now was intended as an encouragement. The interest she feigned in the household of his ancestral home was only a proof that she would gladly condescend, as her sister had condescended before her.

And when he came home from time to time, the brother and sister would look into each other's eyes and find that each had changed,—he in the stifling atmosphere of a court, and she in solitude, yearning for her ideal of happiness.

She was startled at the sobs which she could not suppress; she set her teeth, and with tear-dimmed eyes opened the chest which stood nearest and hastily took from it rugs and embroidered hangings. They were costly affairs, and she intended to have the hall decorated with them. Joachim had collected them on his travels, these Smyrna rugs and Turkish stuffs, and she had bought them for herself at the auction. Gazing at their wonderful combination of colours, the tears coursed down her quiet face.

What was the matter with her? She had never before known herself thus. With eager energy she wiped away her tears, and forced herself to think of cotillon favours and ribbons, of piles of porcelain cups and dishes, of a hair-dresser, of ices, of milk of almonds, and heaven knows what besides, and finally of the folly

of the little Princess's idea of turning a simple garden-party into a masquerade and a dance.

She hurried down-stairs again, gave orders, sent messengers hither and thither, consulted with the gardener and the housekeeper, and in the midst of her cares came Claudine's and Joachim's refusal. She had hardly expected Joachim to come; but Claudine? Beata instantly sought out her brother. She found him in the garden; he was with the Princess Helena and the Countess on the dancing-floor that had been improvised beneath the lindens. The carpenters had just finished their work, and a couple of under-gardeners were busy decorating the rough planks of the enclosure with evergreens, and festooning the pillars.

"Lothar," she began, "Claudine has sent a refusal; will you not ride over and beg her to come?"

He grew still paler than he had been before. "No," he replied, curtly.

The Princess Helena's eyes flashed; she had observed him turn pale.

"Then I will drive over, if you will let me," said Beata.

"You must go to Altenstein, then; you will hardly find her at the Owl's Nest."

"I shall go this evening, when she is at home, and I will not come back without her acceptance," rejoined Beata.

"You seem to be unfortunate, Baron," said the Princess, with an evil glitter in her eyes; "mamma tells me that the Duke will very probably not be present at your *fête*. Her Highness mentioned it with deep regret to mamma in a note she wrote her about her dress."

A vein in the Baron's forehead looked swollen; otherwise his face wore its usual expression; he was eagerly

watching the men, who were fastening small red and white flags to the pillars. "That looks well," he said, calmly; "does it not, your Grace?"

The little Princess nodded.

"Why not use the colours of your house?" she asked, with enchanting amiability. "Yellow and blue, alternating with crimson and white."

"I do not like the combination," he replied; "the contrast is forced."

Beata, who was about to withdraw, turned away in dismay. But the Princess smiled; perhaps she did not agree with Beata in the sense she attached to his words.

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On the afternoon of this day Claudine stood beside her brother's writing-table bidding him good-bye.

"You wrote my refusal?" he asked.

She nodded: "Yours and mine. Good-bye, Joachim."

"Yours?" he asked, in surprise.

"Yes; I do not care for such *fêtes*. Do not be vexed, Joachim."

"Vexed? I do not understand you. You will disappoint Beata sadly."

An arch smile hovered upon his sister's lovely face: "Oh, I can easily appease her. Joachim, I want to stay here on that day; you cannot imagine how I look forward to an afternoon beneath the oak, and to the evening with you."

He held out his hand to her: "Do as you please, Claudine. You know you cannot do wrong in my eyes."

And Claudine went down-stairs, kissed the child, who was making clothes for her doll under Ida's direction, and looked into Frau Lindenmeyer's room. The old lady was asleep in her arm-chair. Claudine softly closed the door and slipped out into the garden, where the

ducal equipage was waiting at the gate. In little more than half an hour she was sitting beneath the oaks in the garden at Altenstein, reading aloud to the Duchess from Joachim's work, 'Spring Days in Spain.' The story of his love was charmingly interwoven with vivid descriptions of the country.

"Claudine," the Duchess interrupted her, "she must have been charming,—your little sister-in-law. Tell me about her."

The girl fixed her blue eyes upon the speaker. "She was something like you, Elizabeth," she said.

"Oh, you flatterer!" said the Duchess; "but that reminds me,—forgive me for interrupting such interesting reading with a question of dress. What if I should take a mantilla and a fan and go as a Spaniard to Neuhaus? I think it's an excellent idea. And you, Dina?"

"I—I have declined, Elizabeth."

The Duchess looked sorry. "What a pity!" she said, slowly and thoughtfully. "The Duke has declined, too."

Claudine's pale face suddenly flushed crimson. Her friend looked at her anxiously.

"Are you too warm?"

"Why does his Highness not accept?" Claudine asked, evasively.

"He gave me no reason," was the reply.

"Elizabeth," said the girl, hastily, "if you command it I will recall my refusal; I can easily do so with Beata."

"I do not command, but it would please me very much," said the Duchess, with a smile.

"Then dismiss me an hour earlier; I should like to tell Beata myself."

"Of course, much as I dislike to have you leave me. But tell me why you did not want to go to Neuhaus. I cannot imagine, Claudine, that you attached such importance to Helena's pettishness that you would visit it upon your relatives."

As she spoke the Duchess took her friend's hand, and tried to look into the blue eyes.

But the long dark eyelashes were not raised, and again the crimson flush dyed the cheeks below them.

"No, no," she said, eagerly, "it is not that. I had promised Joachim to spend a quiet evening with him; I thought you would not miss me amid the brilliancy and noise of the *fête*."

"I never feel more lonely than when I am in the midst of a crowd," the Duchess said, softly, detaining in hers the hand that Claudine would have withdrawn from her clasp.

"I will go with you, Elizabeth."

"Willingly? I will not let you go until you tell me."

"Yes,"—it was said hesitatingly, and she leaned her cheek towards the Duchess's. "Yes," she repeated, "because I love you dearly."

The Duchess kissed her: "As I do you, Dina! Since the time of my betrothal I have not felt so content, so glad as I do when I am with you. And the best of it is that friendship rarely disappoints as love does; the happiness it yields is more calm."

Claudine looked searchingly into her friend's eyes.

"Yes, yes, love and marriage bring us various experiences, little trials, little disappointments. Remember, Claudine, all the ideal expectations with which a girl of eighteen goes to the altar. But, my child, I am the happiest of wives, because he loves me. To know

one's self beloved, to have perfect confidence in a husband's faith and affection, is supreme bliss for a woman; and to lose this confidence would be to me far worse than death itself."

She went on talking, while the book lay neglected in Claudine's lap, of her first meeting with her husband, of the ardent affection she had conceived for him, of her ecstasy when they told her he had sought her in marriage;—how she had clasped her hands, and asked, tremblingly, "Me? Does he woo me?" She told how she had written to him daily during the brief period of her betrothal, how intense had been her happiness and pride when, after their marriage, she had gone out on the balcony of her father's castle to show her gallant, handsome husband to the thousands who filled the public square below, and how then, in an unpretentious carriage, they had driven secretly through the lovely night in spring to a quiet little castle in the vicinity of the capital, where they were to spend their honeymoon.

As she alighted, her train had caught in the carriage, and she had literally fallen at her young husband's feet; they both laughed, and because she had struck her foot he had carried her up the staircase in his arms, through the empty corridors, in which the lamps burned but dimly to their rooms, and there they had sat at the open window and listened to the nightingales in the park, and watched the lights of the castle mirrored in the little lake, and the warm, damp air had been filled with the fragrance of violets.

The dark eyes of the young wife sparkled in recalling her happiness, and when just at this moment the elegant figure of the Duke in faultless summer array appeared from among the shrubbery, her pale, sickly face was absolutely transfigured.

He bowed as he approached, but his humour was evidently none of the gayest.

"Do I intrude?" he asked. "Of course you are discussing costumes. 'Tis a nonsensical idea,—a fancy-dress *fête*."

"Good heavens, yes!" exclaimed the Duchess. "Claudine, where will you get your dress in such a hurry?"

"I have a whole wardrobe-full of my grandmother's gorgeous gowns," she replied; "I am sure there will be something among them that will suit the occasion."

"The gentlemen's dress-coats will contrast extremely well with all these gypsies and powdered dames," sneered the Duke. "Of course it is a whim of Helena's,—that's very clear."

"Why will not you come, Adalbert? Do join us. Why refuse to do Gerold this favour? You used to spoil him in every way," the Duchess begged.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot arrange it," he said, curtly, and began to talk of something else.

"Well, then, Claudine, we must be content with each other; I in a Spanish costume, and you——?"

"In an unbecoming dress of the Empire, your Highness; short waist, narrow skirts, and——"

"I beg pardon. Unbecoming that dress is not," the Duke interposed. "Quite the contrary. But it requires a faultless figure and a certain grace of carriage. Remember the enchanting picture of Queen Louise, and the portrait of my own grandmother, the Duchess Sidonie, in the gallery of our castle." He kissed his finger-tips. "The fashion was a charming one."

Claudine made no reply. The Duchess talked about other matters, the Duke took his leave, and Claudine went on reading.

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It was nearly nine o'clock, and the day had not yet died on the mountain-tops, when she drove to Neuhaus. Herr von Palmer was standing behind the curtains at his window, when he heard the carriage drive out of the court-yard. He twisted his long dyed moustache with slender fingers that gleamed white in the twilight. He knew that the arrow was fitted to the string, that the bow was bent; but one impulse was needed, and a poor human heart would be stricken to death, 'made impossible,' as he expressed it. It was a necessity, and it was high time; this friendship was getting the upper hand; the Duchess treated him shamefully,—worse than before,—and he knew whence that wind blew. If the arrow should graze *her* too, it would serve her right. Ridiculous for Berg to say that the little Princess was afraid on her Highness's account; such natures are tough.

"A superb idea, that of making her little, jealous Grace the one to send the dart!—grand, grand!" he murmured admiringly, pacing the room to and fro. "It needed a woman's brain to arrange that. The effect will be immense,—immense, my fair Claudine. The halls of the ducal castle in the capital will know you no more. You will be powerless to harm. Lothar does not waste a thought upon her, fool that he is with his aspiring wooings; how Berg can imagine *that* I can't conceive. The Duke, however, may spend any amount of thought upon her,—let her Highness's suspicions be once aroused, nothing will avail the lovers. Parted forever! As for who shall next find favour in his Highness's eyes, that will depend upon me. The Berg is still handsome enough, and old love dies hard. She loves him still, and would further my plans most intelligently."

An endless vista of brilliant hopes dazzled the man's eyes; foremost of all was the alluring title of 'High Steward.' His paralytic old Excellency von Elbenstein, whose functions Palmer had fulfilled for months, could not possibly live long; his Highness had already let fall promising hints. Of course there would be bad blood in certain quarters if he, a foreigner whom his Highness had, so to speak, picked up in the streets of Cairo, should be given this position. He smiled again, and whistled a few bars of the march from 'Fatinitza.' "It will not last too long, gentlemen; I must enjoy life while I can." And there hovered before his mental vision Paris, and a delightful little hotel in the Champs-Élysées. "And no more slaving for princes! But Alice! She might be induced to live there too. *Nous verrons!*"

He took his hat and went to see the captain, who had just brewed a bowl of punch; the first delicious fruit had arrived from the ducal forcing-houses.

Claudine left the carriage at the end of the Neuhaus linden avenue; she wished to reach the house and Beata's room unobserved. Avoiding the hall, she entered the back door without being seen, slipped softly through the corridor, and tapped lightly at the door of the sitting-room. A step crossed the room inside and the door was opened.

"It is I, Beata," she whispered. "Do I disturb you? I came for only a moment."

"Is it really you!" exclaimed her cousin, drawing the girl into the room, where the lights were not yet lighted, and gently forcing her into a chair.

"No, no," said Claudine; "I only wanted to tell you that after all I will come the day after to-morrow, if you will let me."

Beata laughed heartily and kissed her. "There!" she called to some one in the dark room. "Which was right, Lothar? There was no need of my drive."

Claudine was startled; a figure came forward from the darkness. "The Duchess desired it," she stammered.

"Her Highness is extremely kind," he said, and his voice sounded hoarse. "The Duke has also just done me the honour to withdraw his refusal."

Claudine grasped the back of a chair for support, but said not a word. What an unlucky chance!

"But sit down," Beata urged; "we see and hear nothing of each other nowadays. Of course I have very little time, but, since you are here, help me to arrange the places at table; I do not know the half of these people who have accepted."

"Excuse me, Beata; I have a headache, and the carriage is waiting at the end of the avenue," the girl said, turning to go. "Let them draw lots," she added, as if wishing to atone for her rudeness in refusing to assist her cousin.

"Certainly," Lothar assented. "Chance will surely heed devout prayers and assign a prize. Will you allow me to conduct you to your carriage?"

Beata looked disappointed, and stayed behind. Lothar walked beside the agitated girl through the lighted hall and out into the garden. Neither uttered a syllable.

The entire row of windows on the first floor of the castle was illuminated: the Princess Helena loved a great deal of light. She had left the table early, 'to try

on fancy dresses.' The rays from the windows penetrated some of the recesses of the shrubbery. The odour of the linden-blossoms was stifling, the summer evening was sultry; the moon was hidden by dark clouds.

They walked on quickly side by side; just before them a shadow glided behind one of the tallest trees; another followed it. Lothar did not perceive them, but Claudine involuntarily paused. "Do you see nothing?" she asked, anxiously.

"No."

"It must have been an illusion."

She hurried on to the carriage, inclined her head with a cold 'good-night,' and drove off.

The noise of the wheels died away in the silent garden; the man who had stood looking after the carriage walked along the foot-path outside the wall of the park towards the forest, as if to lose himself and find repose in its lonely depths.

"Alice," the Princess Helena whispered, passionately, coming from behind the trunk of a tree,—*"Alice, he has driven off with her!"*

"Your Highness, it was only a piece of courtesy."

"Oh, I cannot bear it, Alice! What is she doing here? What did she want? Speak to me, Alice!"

The agitated whisper had grown to be loudly-uttered words.

"Great heavens, your Highness," Frau von Berg began, as if unable to find words with which to express her surprise and pain, "what shall I say? I am utterly confounded!"

The Princess hurried off to the gate of the park; there stood an old stone bench, behind which she kneeled on the ground in the dark, waiting, waiting

with throbbing pulses for his return. In vain did Frau von Berg's voice resound through the dark, sultry garden. At last she went up to her own room and smiled into the tall mirror before which she stood to try the effect in her abundant hair of the gay kerchief which she was to wear at the *fête* as part of her Italian costume. The Princess appeared at the end of an hour with pale cheeks and swollen eyelids. Not a moment did she sleep that night.

The *fête* at Neuhaus was at its height. The warm summer evening, with no breeze, made it possible for the invalid Duchess to remain in the open air. The crimson curtains of the tent pitched beneath the lindens, not far from the dancing-floor, were thrown back; there she half reclined in a cushioned chair, surrounded by a crowd of ladies and gentlemen. The strange light, compounded of twilight, moonlight, and the rays from hundreds of coloured lanterns, caused her pale face beneath the lace mantilla to look paler than ever, and the eyes more large and glowing. She wore a short scarlet skirt flounced with black lace, and a black Andalusian jacket embroidered with gold. A white bearskin had been laid on the ground beneath her feet, in their small black satin slippers with diamond buckles. She looked positively beautiful this evening; she knew it, the Duke's eyes had told her so, and consequently she was beaming with happiness.

The Princess Thekla, in a gray moiré silk, sat beside her.

The most charming picture was presented to their

view beneath the boughs of the lindens, now a century old, whose leaves showed a rich emerald-green in the brilliant illumination. There was wealth of youth and beauty,—gleaming jewels, snowy shoulders, brilliant colours, and strange effects of light and shade. Groups of fantastic figures, seemingly evoked from some fairy realm, were bathed in the bewildering fragrance of the linden-blossoms, and around them the electrifying music of one of Strauss's waltzes floated on the air.

"This is like a *fête* at Tiefert in Goethe's time," said the Duchess.

"Especially when one looks at the beautiful Gerold. Only look, your Highness, at that figure,—absolutely classic! Wonderful!"

The speaker, an aristocratic old gentleman, whose delicate features expressed an ecstasy of admiration, was standing behind her Highness's chair, watching Claudine.

"Oh, yes, my dear Count," the Duchess replied, and her eyes sparkled as she looked at her favourite, "she is, as always, the star of the evening."

"Your Highness is too modest," said Princess Thekla, and her cold gaze in the same direction was annihilating.

Claudine was standing on the grass outside the garlanded and bedecked dancing-floor. The old Count had not said too much; never had her unique beauty showed to such advantage as on this evening in the costume of her great-grandmother. She wore her magnificent fair hair gathered into a knot at the back of her head; some little curls strayed over her neck and above her brow; a delicate diadem, in front of which sparkled a diamond star, crowned her beautiful head. The short waist revealed superbly-modelled arms and shoulders in a light covering of shining tulle.

A short skirt of some white, translucent silken stuff, its broad hem embroidered with silver, left exposed the small pink satin slippers tied with crossed pink ribbons. And this airy dress was completed by a pale pink train of heavy silk edged with a broad band of silver embroidery. Around the waist and tied at one side was a broad pink sash shot with silver, and a bunch of fresh centifolia roses, the favourite rose of the period, adorned the front of the waist. The girl's exquisite beauty and grace were set off by the antique dress, which had been worn by her great-grandmother, then lady-in-waiting at the court of X——, at a *fête* in Weimar,—one of those informal witty assemblies in which Karl Augustus and the Duchess Amalie so delighted, and which were made luminous by an immortal talent.

Yes, there were attached to this gown memories never to be forgotten! That train had swept past Goethe in those days when he still paid 'endless' homage to Beauty. He had spoken rapturously of the young Baroness's eyes, and it had been the worthy woman's lifelong pride. The diary was still extant in which she had written, "Young Goethe, the Duke's friend, was gallanting about with every pretty face, and made me a very amiable speech about my eyes." There was still lurking in the folds of this gown a delicate odour of lavender, the perfume of that gay, witty, sparkling past.

Perhaps it intoxicated his Highness, for the Duke had been standing for a quarter of an hour before the beautiful girl, who, with the heavy folds of her train gathered up in her hand as if ready for flight, seemed to be restlessly gazing past him as if for some opportunity to escape. The two were left alone in the midst of a wide circle of respectful courtiers, as if it were

intended to afford his Highness every chance to talk undisturbed with the beautiful Gerold. And yet while all were apparently occupied only with themselves, jesting, laughing, chatting, every eye was casting stolen glances at the incomparably lovely creature who was so strikingly distinguished by the ducal homage.

The Princess Helena, who, in a Greek dress, was dancing a quadrille with his Highness's adjutant, perceived this with secret joy; she turned her dark head with so sudden a movement that the gold coins fringing her blue velvet cap jingled and glittered; she was resolved to see how the Baron regarded this public *tête-à-tête*. He had been standing a minute ago, leaning against the trunk of a tree, holding a glass of iced champagne, having just clinked glasses with two or three gentlemen around him. Now he had vanished. Helena hastily turned to look towards where Claudine was standing, and she compressed her lips, for Baron Lothar was approaching the pair:

"Pardon me, your Highness. Her Highness the Duchess wishes to speak with Fräulein von Gerold. —May I have the honour, cousin?"

The Duke hastily stroked his beard; he was in the midst of a detailed description of certain costumes and modes of dressing the hair, and appeared unwilling to be interrupted.

Claudine courtesied and laid her finger-tips upon the offered arm of Lothar, who slowly conducted her to the Duchess's tent.

"Go to her Highness for a moment," he said, calmly. "It might else create surprise. Afterwards——"

She paused and looked into his unmoved face: "I thought her Highness wished to speak with me?"

"No," he replied, composedly; "but I saw you were

on tenter-hooks, and that a hundred prying eyes were on you. Besides," he went on, "since I must see you here among these people this evening, I would fain admire you near your friend. Surely your blond beauty beside yon Andalusian would be the most charming picture of the evening. Gratify us with it."

She withdrew her hand from his arm. The relief she had felt in obeying his summons gave place to hot indignation. She made no reply, but went instantly to the Duchess.

"Claudine," said her Highness, holding out a hand to her, "why do you not dance? I should like to see you in that quadrille. I think a *vis-à-vis* is lacking to a couple there.—Herr von Gerold, pray."

Claudine could not refuse; mechanically she took his arm; a place was quickly found for the host with his partner. They stood opposite the Princess Helena and the captain. Lothar was silent; they were a strangely-mute couple, as well as the handsomest in the assemblage.

The Princess's sky-blue satin skirt swept rustling past Claudine in the dance, a trembling icy little hand touched her own; she scarcely noticed it. Only once did she look into the face of the Princess, encountering as she did so a look of mortal dislike; those black orbs fairly pierced her own eyes. She was dismayed, and glanced in inquiry at the captain; he returned her glance with an expression eloquent of reproach. She held her head proudly erect, and scarcely was the dance concluded, and Lothar's arm offered, when she asked, "Where is Beata?"

"Probably in the castle," he replied.

She thanked him and hurriedly took her way thither. Out of regard for the invalid Duchess, tables had been

set in the spacious hall for a select few; the massive folding-doors were flung wide open, affording a view of the illuminated garden; the table was nestling, as it were, in an orangery. Joachim's rugs draped the walls effectively, and the steps of the fine old staircase were covered with costly stuffs. Prosaic Beata had achieved a masterpiece of decoration.

She herself was standing repeating her instructions to half a dozen lackeys. Claudine could not but smile as she observed how obedient and respectful was their demeanour towards the simple peasant-girl, which was the modest character adopted by their strict mistress upon this occasion. She clapped her hands merrily at sight of Claudine.

"Upon my word, my dear," she exclaimed, "you are uncannily bewitching in your Old-World gown. And how well it has kept! the silver is not even tarnished!"

She patted her cousin's cheek, kissed her, and, pointing to the glittering table, asked, "Is it all right, Claudine dear? From the head, where her Highness sits, there is the best view of the fireworks. Your place is rather low down; those twelve covers are for the Princesses and their cavaliers. The rest must distribute themselves about at the tables in the garden as chance may direct. There is the basket with the lots; I took your advice."

"Let me beg you, Beata, to leave me out of the company at the ducal table!" exclaimed Claudine. "I would far rather sit elsewhere."

"And have his Highness frown at me all the rest of the evening? No, my darling, no use to ask. You must swallow the bitter pill. Of course I cannot tell who will be your neighbour. But excuse me: I must see the housekeeper."

"Beata!" cried Claudine, trying to grasp the peasant-girl by her snowy sleeve, but she had already disappeared behind the hanging that divided the corridor from the hall. The girl was left alone, and stood for a moment looking out into the garden, longing to escape and flee along the stony forest paths to her peaceful, secluded home. The notes of a waltz came floating towards her; she was sick at heart. She knew herself perfectly free from blame, and yet she was possessed by a sensation of distress and anxiety. She was aware that the true reason for the Duke's withdrawal of his refusal was that the Grand Duke of Z——, whom he wished to meet at the nearest railway station, had postponed the journey which led him to pass that way. And yet she had perceived so strange an expression on the faces of all the courtiers,—a look of inquisitive loyalty, it might be termed,—they had been so eager to retire when the Duke had approached her, and *he* had been as unkind and discourteous as possible, when he had led her away from his Highness.

She compressed her lips; again the bitter smile gave place to the old expression of coldness and pride.

Suddenly she turned and listened. A peculiar sound penetrated even the strains of the music; she could not tell whether it came from within the castle or from outside. It was like the cry of some animal in distress. But now—— No, it was the voice of a child, and it came in a shrill scream from above. The next instant Claudine flew up the staircase, hurried along the broad upper corridor, and entered the open door whence the cries proceeded.

The pink light from the hanging-lamp lighted the apartment but dimly. At first Claudine saw nothing but the child's large, soft playing-rug, strewn with

dolls and toys, and the little empty bed, its curtains pulled aside. The room seemed entirely deserted; the crying had ceased; nothing was stirring. Claudine gazed about her searchingly, advanced a step, and then paused aghast with horror. There at the open window—not upon the inside seat, but upon the stone sill outside—crouched the child! Its long night-gown had got twisted about its little legs; it had probably grown suddenly frightened; it sat there, with nothing between it and the depth below, gazing with tearful eyes at the apparition of the strange lady. The slightest motion on the child's part, and it was lost.

The girl stood breathless for an instant,—there was not even a rustle of her silken train,—while thought careered with lightning speed through her brain. Would her approach terrify the child? “God of mercy, help me!” she whispered.

A smile suddenly hovered upon her lips; she hastily loosened the bracelet from her arm and dangled it, glittering and attractive, before her, while she advanced, first one step, then another. And now she clutched the long night-dress. The little body swayed backward; there was a feeble cry, but the strong white arms were round it, and the next moment Claudine was kneeling with the terrified little creature on the carpet; her trembling knees had refused to support her. Half fainting, she leaned her head against the corner of a dressing-table, while her large blue eyes looked lustreless from her ashy face.

Some one was kneeling beside her, as terrified, as pale, as trembling as herself; two hot lips were pressed upon her hands and upon the child's little face.

“Lothar,” she murmured, and tried to rise.

He took the child from her, carried it to its little

bed, and then returned to where she now stood erect, ready to pass him and leave the room.

"Claudine!" There was a quiver in his voice as he barred her way.

"It was almost too late," she said, with an attempt at a smile, which sat but ill upon her ghastly face.

He took her hand and led her to the little bed. The child was sitting up and laughing; he lifted it in his arms and laid its face against the girl's pale cheek.

"Thank her!" he said, in a voice full of emotion. "Your father dare not do it."

Claudine saw how the hands trembled that held the little one, and she lightly kissed the childish cheek.

"A while ago," she said, coolly, "I was vexed with myself for having, after all, accepted your invitation, cousin. I think I may forgive myself now."

A painful pause ensued. The child, with a laugh, clutched at the star in the fair hair. Claudine had to bend her head to loosen the tiny hand; it took some time. Outside, a rocket mounted hissing into the air, the sign for the beginning of supper. Music, laughter, merry voices, grew more distinct, and a crimson light from without illumined the room.

Claudine went to the mirror to rearrange her dishevelled curls. She did not see the passionate, grieved glance that followed her from those dark eyes, nor had she seen how, a few minutes before, a graceful figure in pale blue had appeared at the wide-open door, as if wafted there, only to hurry away again as though it had been aware of some frightful spectacle in the dim room, instead of a charming *genre* picture worthy of Meissonier,—a beautiful girl beside the Baron, who held in his arms his laughing child.

"I will see that the nurse is sent," said Claudine, as

she left the room; "the little explorer might else escape from bed again."

At that moment, however, there appeared, not the child's nurse, but Frau von Berg.

"Have the kindness, Frau von Berg, to remain beside Leonie's bed until the nurse—whom, by the way, you seem to have in excellent training—returns to her post. I should be sorry to have the child run the risk a second time of the danger which it has just escaped, of falling out of that window." He spoke quietly, even ironically.

Claudine had passed hurriedly into the corridor; she did not see the dismay in the face of the fair Italian, who, at a few desperate whispered words from the Princess Helena as to the strange spectacle she had witnessed, had come, by virtue of her office, to investigate matters in the nursery. Claudine had reached the end of the passage when Lothar overtook her. Together they descended the staircase leading to the hall.

A murmur of admiration ran through the throng of people in the hall and among those standing outside the entrance, so lovely was the picture presented by the beautiful figure in antique costume, slowly stepping down the richly-decorated staircase.

"*Magnifique! Enchanting!*" murmured the Duke, and his look grew sad. But the Duchess beckoned with her bouquet of pomegranates.

"Claudine," she said, when the girl stood before her, "we have just determined to draw lots too; why should not the Duke and I confide in chance for once, to-night? Our kind hostess has had our names added to those in the basket."

And when Countess Moorsleben, with a coquettish courtesy which suited well her pretty rococo costume,

offered the silver basket containing gilt-edged cards inscribed with the names of the gentlemen present to her Highness for her choice, she gayly drew forth from it one of the small rolls. Princess Thekla refused to draw lots; the Princess Helena's hand trembled as, standing just behind her Highness, she put it into the basket. Apparently the Countess was about carelessly to overlook Claudine, but the Duchess touched her on the shoulder with her bouquet, and she was obliged to pause.

"Dearest Claudine," said the royal lady, "your fate awaits you." And Claudine also took one of the little billets.

"Do not read it yet," said the Duchess, seeming greatly interested in the game. Her large dark eyes sparkled kindly; she leaned lightly on Claudine's arm. "Look, Dina," she said, in an undertone, "how curiously the gentlemen are surveying the ladies! Positively, Adalbert himself is glancing in comic terror at my worthy Katzenstein. How funny she looks as Frau von Goethe!"

The powdered head of the pretty lady-in-waiting reappeared here and there amid the throng, until at last she held the little silver basket aloft empty, and at the same moment the band began the overture to the 'Midsummer-Night's Dream.'

The ladies were to conduct to table the cavaliers appointed them by lot. Thus it had been arranged by the Princess Helena. The rustle of opening papers, mingled with the soft tones of the music, laughter, and exclamations, ensued.

Her Highness's eyes sparkled merrily. She had found upon her slip of paper the name of a shy, callow lieutenant.

"Well, Claudine?" she asked, looking at her friend's paper. "Oh—his Highness!"

Claudine turned pale; the hand that held the slip of paper trembled. "An extraordinary chance!" was uttered in a low whisper just behind her.

The Duchess turned slowly and measured the Princess Helena from head to foot with a cold glance. All the innocent enjoyment had vanished from her face. She silently laid her hand on Claudine's arm and drew her through the throng, which parted respectfully to allow her to pass.

"Here, Adalbert," she said to the Duke, who was standing beside Palmer,—“here is the companion at supper whom kindly chance has allotted you.—Herr von Palmer, pray find Lieutenant von Waldhaus for me: he has fallen to my share.”

Herr von Palmer hurried away. The Duchess stood, her smiling face hidden in her bouquet, beside his Highness and Claudine, until a slender young officer of hussars, breathless and blushing, appeared and bowed low before her.

In a few seconds the moving crowd was grouped about the tables; a broad, glittering stream of youth, beauty, and splendid attire issued from the hall, where the Duchess with her youthful cavalier presided beneath a crimson canopy, into the garden. They sat in the bluish moonlight upon the steps, which were covered with rugs, or beneath the lindens in the reddish light of the lanterns, while soft music sounded through the sultry, fragrant summer night.

The Duke turned with Claudine towards the garden, pointing to a dim spot beneath the lindens. "It is too warm here in the hall," he declared. On the hall steps he paused and looked into the girl's lovely

face, now wearing an expression of painful embarrassment.

"Great heavens, Fräulein Claudine!" he said, compassionately, "what can you think——? I am neither a robber nor a beggar, and—you have my promise. Do not grudge me this innocent enjoyment."

She walked beside him mechanically down the steps to one of the small tables, laid for only four people, beneath the lindens. Her long pink train lay in the silver moonlight on the grass, betraying her whereabouts; she, herself, now stood proudly erect behind her chair in the darkness.

"Eh!" exclaimed the Duke, suddenly; "there is room here, Gerold."

The Baron had descended the steps with his companion, the gentle young wife of the Landrath von N.; he looked about him restlessly, and as he hurried towards the Duke's table, the pretty little woman at his side, in green tulle embroidered with pearls, and with water-lilies in her hair, could hardly keep pace with him.

"His Highness summons me," he said.

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief as he held the chair for his companion to take her seat at the table, and beckoned to a servant passing with a salver of refreshments.

To the little Princess chance had assigned Herr von Palmer. She sat at her Highness's table in the hall, where was also the Princess Thekla. From her place the Duchess could see the table at which her husband was supping; the figures of the four people there were revealed as in a picture by Rembrandt. Now and then she raised her champagne-glass and drank to the Duke. Baron Lothar rose once, and, standing on the hall

steps, toasted their Highnesses. The Duke toasted the ladies. Princess Helena's eyes glanced continually, with a positively demonic expression in them, towards that table in the garden; those seated at it seemed very gay: she distinctly heard the Duke's sonorous laughter.

Sometimes she turned and looked at the Duchess, observing with satisfaction that her Highness's gaze repeatedly rested upon that group; there seemed to be a troubled inquiry in her eyes, although her lips smiled and her mood was apparently gayer than it had been for a long time. Those about her shared this mood; Frau von Katzenstein, who had been taken to supper by a young squire, especially distinguished herself by her dry humour.

At dessert, when the snapping of the bonbons was added to the hiss of the rockets, the Princess Helena asked Herr von Palmer to exchange seats with her, a request instantly complied with, and she took the place beside the Duchess. Her Highness had scarcely spoken to Palmer; all her conversation had been for her youthful cavalier. At first the little Princess was silent. In spite of her unconscionable jealousy, her heart beat quick at the idea of what she meant to do. Contrary to etiquette, she emptied several glasses of champagne, Herr von Palmer taking good care to see that her glass was kept filled.

There was wild work in her passionate, wayward little head this evening. She looked into the garden again; a bengal-light flashed up and showed the woman whom she hated seated beside him; they were not talking to each other, but his face was turned towards Claudine, as if to enjoy to the full the girl's beauty bathed in that flood of white light. Helena's rebellious blood,

heated by the wine she had drunk, mounted to her head and bewildered her.

"Your Highness," she whispered, leaning towards her just as the Duchess was preparing to rise,—“your Highness! Elizabeth, heaven knows your confidence is too implicit.”

Did the Duchess hear her? She rose slowly and with dignity. The signal for leaving the table was given, chairs were pushed back, and outside, beneath the dark trees, there appeared in fiery characters an intertwined A. E. surmounted by a ducal crown. The company poured out into the garden to dance again.

“Pray send the Princess Helena to me,” the Duchess said to her cavalier, as after a moment she re-entered the pavilion near the dancing-floor. She had thrown a light wrap about her shoulders, and looked as if she were chilly. She did not sit down; her carriage had been ordered, but the Duke was still standing beneath the lindens, talking to Claudine.

Princess Helena appeared immediately, a kind of desperate decision in her air.

“Explain yourself more clearly, cousin,” the Duchess addressed her aloud, making a sign to Frau von Katzenstein to withdraw. There was now no one else in the pavilion, from the rosy twilight of which there was an outlook into the moonlit *fête* through the parted curtains.

“Your Highness,” the passionate girl exclaimed, indignantly, “I cannot endure to see you so deceived.”

“Who is deceiving me?”

Once more all that was good and noble gained the upper hand in the girl's heart. She saw how the woman before her struggled to be calm; she knew

well all that her own next words must signify to that imperilled life.

"No one! no one!" she gasped. "Let me go, Elizabeth; send me away!"

"Who is deceiving me?" the Duchess asked again, with all the decision she could command.

The Princess clasped her small hands and glanced towards Claudine, who was still detained by the Duke. The Duchess's eyes followed the glance, and she grew deadly pale.

"I do not understand," she said, coldly.

The Princess's heart throbbed madly against the little case in which she kept the Duke's note. "Your Highness *will* not understand," she whispered. "You choose to shut your eyes." She raised her hands, still clasped, and pressed them against the blue silk jacket; again in fancy she saw the scene in the dim room by the child's bedside. "Claudine von Gerold!" she gasped.

Before she could utter another word the Duchess tottered, and would have fallen had not Helena supported her, but in an instant her Highness recovered herself. "This sultry night seems to beget fever," she said, with a smile on her pale lips. "Go to bed, cousin, and take some cooling drink; you talk wildly. —Call Fräulein von Gerold, my dear Katzenstein," she said to the old lady-in-waiting, who hurried up anxiously at sight of her mistress's pale face.

And when the beautiful girl appeared, her Highness said, kindly, and loud enough for even those outside the pavilion to hear, "Take me to the carriage, Dina; and remember that you will have to attend a sick-bed to-morrow. I am afraid this beautiful *fête* has been too much for me."

She leaned heavily on Claudine's arm, and walked, accompanied by the Duke and Baron Lothar, to where the carriage was waiting for her; and as she went she bowed graciously to the right and left, without, however, acknowledging the Princess Helena's low courtesy. When Claudine returned with Lothar she had the Duchess's bouquet of pomegranates in her hand.

She lingered for a few moments among the crowd, who suddenly seemed quite unconscious of her presence; but she did not observe this; she longed for rest. "Good-night, Beata; I am going home."

"How strange the Duchess seemed as she took leave!" said Beata, walking with Claudine to where her carriage waited. "She looked at you as if she would fain have read the depths of your soul, and yet as if she had some atonement to make to you. There is a childlike tenderness about that woman. How sweet her manner was when she handed you her bouquet from the carriage window and said, 'My dear Claudine,' as if she could not show you affection enough!"

"We love each other very dearly," Claudine answered, simply.

Princess Helena went on dancing far into the night,—"as if she were frantic," thought Frau von Berg, who had returned to the garden after emptying the vials of her wrath upon the head of the nurse. The Princess's eyes sparkled with tears while she laughed and plied her ivory fan energetically. Suddenly she felt as if she could no longer endure her distress, her anguish, and she fled to a dark recess among the trees, and flung herself upon an iron bench there, leaning her hot cheek against the cool metal. Frau von Berg confronted her with a gloomy air.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "what if any one should see your Grace thus?"

"Is the Baron coming?" asked the weeping girl, drying her eyes.

Frau von Berg smiled: "Not at all; he is talking with Landrath von Besser about insurance against fire."

"Did you see, Alice? The Duchess gave the Gerold her bouquet as she left; that was all the effect produced"—here she laughed—"by my well-meant warning."

Frau von Berg continued to smile: "Excuse me, your Grace, but the Duchess could not do otherwise. So noble a character does not doubt a friend upon such a mere *on dit*. I thought you knew her Highness better. Why, you yourself insisted upon '*proof*'!"

The Princess clapped both hands to her ears, as if she did not choose to hear more.

"Proof!" Frau von Berg repeated. "Proof, your Grace!"

Immediately upon her return home the Duchess retired to her chamber and to rest.

How easy it is to say 'to rest'! how natural it sounds! and yet how persistently sleep flies from a troubled heart!

She had taken some cooling drink, and lay back in her quiet room, her hands clasped listlessly beneath her head. Sometimes she coughed, and her cheeks began to burn.

It had been too much for her, that noisy *fête*; she ought to have stayed in the sick-room, where she be-

longed; but it is hard to be so young and already so infirm. Will it ever be better?

She felt a dull pain at her left side. "Strange! what can it be?" Was it physical? Was it the heart? Like some paralyzing anguish it crept through all her veins and dulled her power of thought.

"Impossible!" she whispered, suddenly aware whence came the dull pain. "Impossible!" She sat up in bed and looked about her, as if to make sure that she was awake and not tormented by an evil dream. There on her toilet-table lay the diamonds which her maid had taken from her hair; she had dismissed her attendant so hastily that she had not allowed her time to put them away; she had felt an urgent desire to be alone. She usually liked to have a little chat with her good Katzenstein before resting; but to-night the worthy old soul had been dismissed in the corridor.

There, upon the back of a crimson-cushioned chair, hung her lace mantilla, and beside it still lay one of the centifolia roses from Claudine's breast; she had asked for it because she so delighted in its fragrance.

How beautiful the girl had been!

The Duchess took the ivory-framed hand-glass from the table beside her bed and looked into it. In the dim crimson light there looked out at her a pair of hollow eyes set in a thin, sallow face. She dropped the glass on the coverlet and lay back, seized with absolute terror. "Oh, merciful God!" she whispered. And then she took from the table the Duke's picture, gazed at the proud, handsome face, and pressed it passionately to her lips.

Ah, she knew—none better—how devotedly that man could be loved!

With the picture clasped to her breast she lay back,

gazing into space. Claudine's bewitching beauty, as she had seen her a few hours previously, loomed before her eyes; she saw her beside the Duke at table, and beneath the lindens during the dance. The girl had changed colour continually. How embarrassed she always was when his Highness entered the room! She never sang willingly when he was by. At times she was so depressed, and then again so merry!

Poor Claudine! A fine friend you have here thinking of you; one who urgently entreated your friendship to doubt you afterwards.

No, she would not doubt her. Absurd gossip! The little Princess was sometimes entirely incomprehensible!

Poor Claudine!

The Duchess smiled, and then suddenly pearly drops of moisture gathered on her brow, and through the singing and surging in her ears of her agitated blood there rang, like some pitiless bell, the voice of the Princess: "Your Highness *will* not see; you do not choose to understand." "Our Father" came, wrung from her soul, and her hot hands clasped the picture closer to her restless, throbbing heart. Her lips whispered the Lord's Prayer to its close. "Amen! Death rather than *that*! Dear God, let me die! let me die!"

She passed in review her entire married life. She herself had lavishly adorned with roses the altar of her happiness; could she have overlooked the sad fact that it would else have been bare of all decoration,—that she *alone* had prayed before it?

How came she to have such an idea? No, her happiness had not been an illusion; it had been really hers. How kind, how considerate, how attentive he had always been, especially since she had been ill!

Kind? Considerate? Is that all that love can give?

She groaned. A veil seemed to fall from her eyes, revealing depths of desolation.

And yet he had never given her cause for jealousy,—that plebeian passion, as Princess Thekla called it, which she said no princess should ever experience.

“I do not myself know the passion,” she had made reply; “thank God I have had no occasion for it.” But at this moment she, the reigning Duchess, the royal Princess, knew that she had to a great degree fallen a victim to this passion,—that it was to torture her hopelessly.

Again she looked in the glass, and then clasped her hands before her eyes. Had she been blind? What could she be to him, ill, tottering on the brink of the grave as she was? Nothing, nothing save a burden. But not that, only not that.

Could they not wait until she was dead? How long would it be? “Ah, have compassion only for so long! Take pity!”

She sank back half fainting, incapable of motion, and yet feeling that she was awake, that it was all horribly real, that her fate had cast aside a smiling mask to show its real face; ah, so comfortless, so despairing a face!

She did not know how long she lay there. She no longer had the strength to call herself to account; she saw a fair head lying on his breast as her own had once lain, while she herself lay in her coffin and could not stir. The cold moisture stood in drops upon her forehead; by a frightful effort she started up and rang her bell loudly. The waiting-maid, terrified, appeared on the instant.

"Open the window," gasped the Duchess, sitting erect in bed. "I am stifling."

The maid hastened to the window and drew aside the curtains, letting the first rays of the glowing morning sun penetrate the apartment to play about the feverishly agitated young wife upon her couch.

She gazed inquiringly out into this wondrously lovely world, her eyes wandering beyond the summits of the trees of the park, quivering in the morning air, to the pine-clad range of mountains that showed bluish green on the horizon. She inhaled the pure, fresh air, she heard the twittering of the birds amid the foliage, and she burst into tears, tears of shame at her despair, her distrust.

She lay sobbing for a time, and at last fell asleep. When she awoke, Claudine was sitting beside her couch. She was arranging some roses, which she had begged of Heinemann, and was so absorbed in her noiseless occupation that she did not for a time perceive the Duchess's eyes resting upon her. When she looked up a glad expression lit up her anxious face.

"Ah, dear Elizabeth!" she exclaimed, kneeling beside the bed with her flowers, "how you have frightened me! What is the matter? Frau von Katzenstein sent for me in the early morning. Did you exert yourself too much last evening?"

The Duchess propped her head upon her hand, looking fixedly into the lovely face, where anxiety and distress were so plain to see. Then she stroked the fair head caressingly. "I am better now," she said, gently; "how glad I am you came!"

She was unusually silent all the forenoon, but she continually followed Claudine with her eyes. Towards noon she tried to rise, but she was obliged to go back to bed.

"Stay with me, Claudine," she begged.

"Yes, Elizabeth."

The invalid opened her weary eyes, and, as if surprised by this ready assent, asked, "You can stay away from home without anxiety?"

"Do not speak of it, Elizabeth. Even though my absence were felt there, I should come. I will write a line to Joachim and send for a few things. Do not be troubled."

"Tell me something," the Duchess said towards evening. She had been lying almost motionless, with closed eyes, during the afternoon.

"With pleasure, Elizabeth. What shall it be about?"

"Something about your life."

"Ah, good heavens, there is very little to tell. I think you know it all, Elizabeth."

"All?"

"Yes, my dear Elizabeth."

"Were you never in love, Dina?"

The girl's face was suffused with a burning blush; she slowly bowed her head.

"Ah, hush, Elizabeth!" she said, almost in a whisper; "do not ask—I——"

"Can you not tell me?" the Duchess persisted. "Give me your confidence, Dina; ah, give it me! You know all about me."

At this moment the Duke was announced, and, almost overcome, the girl arose and, with a bow, was about to pass him and retire to the antechamber.

"Claudine! Claudine!" cried the invalid, and as she returned, the Duchess pointed to a seat beside her bed. "Stay here!" she said, in a tone of command. It was the first time that she had spoken so to her friend.

Claudine sat down. She heard how tenderly and

compassionately the Duke addressed the invalid, hoping that she would be able to take part in the garden-party which they were to have on the morrow, for which 'mamma' had promised to come to them.

"I will take pains to be well," she replied.

"That's right, Liesel. Take pains." And the Duke laughed. "If all invalids would only resolve thus, there would be fewer of them. The will really has something to do with recovery; ask our worthy doctor."

"I know it, I know it," she said, hastily.

"The doctor maintains that you are only mentally ailing to-day," the Duke went on. "I cannot see how that can be. I think, my child, that you have simply taken cold. You must be careful; the night air is not good for you. In the winter you must certainly go to Cannes."

"In the winter," she thought, with bitterness. Aloud she said, "But I do not want to be careful."

His Highness stared in amazement to hear such a tone from one usually so docile. "You certainly are very much out of sorts," he said, with a degree of severity sure to be excited by illogical antagonism. Then turning to Claudine, he remarked, as if to change the subject, "Your cousin gave us a charming *fête* yesterday; the arrangements were perfect. And what original costumes! Yours, for instance, Fräulein von Gerold; simply exquisite, was it not, Elizabeth?"

"I really cannot bear conversation, Adalbert; please go—," said the invalid, her lips quivering nervously. And as he was retiring with an impatient gesture, she held out her hand to him, and with her eyes filled with tears said, "Forgive me!" And then she took Claudine's hand, and clasping it in her own, which burned with fever, lay back and closed her eyes.

He had gone.

Meanwhile, dark clouds had gathered in the skies; the air was sultry, and seemed to threaten a storm. In the misty twilight the Duchess's face looked like that of a corpse. Thus she lay immovable, and thus Claudine sat beside her, for hours.

It all seemed to the girl weirdly strange.

The news of the Duchess's illness had spread everywhere.

"She looked remarkably pale just before she left," Princess Thekla remarked, as they sat at supper in the Neuhaus dining-hall.

"My cousin was sent for at an early hour this morning," said Beata, who showed no sign of fatigue, although she had not been to bed, that she might oversee the removal of every trace of the previous evening's entertainment. Every fork, every cup, every piece of furniture, was in its place; there was nothing to remind one of the fairy spectacle of last night, least of all in the people themselves. "She has just written to me," Beata continued, "that she is attending upon the Duchess, and is staying at Altenstein."

"What a touching friendship!" exclaimed the old Princess, who was in a very bad humour, for early in the morning, while she was still slumbering sweetly, Baron Lothar had dismissed the child's nurse upon the spot, and very shortly afterwards a note had been brought to Frau von Berg's bedside, rousing her from a delightful dream. It contained a dismissal in due form from her position as 'the governess of my

daughter;' couched, to be sure, in excessively courteous terms, but thus it was, although at the close the Baron most amiably begged Madame to accept, for as long as might be agreeable to her, the hospitality of his mansion.

She threw on a dressing-gown, and in defiance of all etiquette rushed into the Princess Helena's bedroom. Her little Grace looked wretched, with dark rings around her eyes, as if she had cried more than slept during the night.

"What of it?" had been the pettishly expressed consolation tendered to Frau von Berg. "You can come to mamma, Alice; I will speak to her. The Moorsleben is going back to her parents in any case."

And 'mamma' had actually requested 'dear Alice' to come to her. It was unheard of,—dismissing a lady as if she had been a *bonne*,—a lady, too, whom *she* had selected! And yet she had not ventured to remonstrate; the brief statement of the Baron's reasons was too much to the point; indeed, she was obliged for form's sake to reprove the person to whom the death from neglect of her beloved grandchild had nearly been owing. Besides, he had not yet declared himself, and he could not be chosen in marriage like a partner for a waltz.

Frau von Berg was not perfectly content with this arrangement; she sat, pale, and like an innocent, insulted angel, in her room, outwardly nobly composed, inwardly beside herself with anger. The nursery had been suddenly removed to the story below, close to Beata's comfortable old sleeping-room, looking out upon the spacious, airy court-yard, where horses, cows, and chickens were to be seen; the same prospect that had delighted the eyes of the child's father and of Aunt

Beata when they were children. And the same faithful creature who had had charge of them now held the little girl in her arms,—a cleanly peasant woman of between fifty and sixty years, with the kindest eyes in the world beneath her black cap. Lothar had gone for her himself early in the morning, and had brought her to his child from her pretty little cottage at the farther end of the village.

“What a touching friendship!” the Princess Thekla exclaimed, and Beata did not, and Lothar would not, notice the sarcasm. He sat as if lost in thought in the growing darkness of the coming storm.

“The Duchess is often ill, as we all know, mamma,” said Princess Helena, who seemed never to take her eyes from Lothar.

“Of course! Perhaps she was annoyed at something,” the old Princess observed, significantly. “Besides, this sultriness is oppressive; I had no idea that it could be so hot here in the mountains. I am constantly remembering the cool, dashing waves of the North Sea.—Herr von Pansewitz,”—turning to her chamberlain,—“have you heard from Ostend whether we can have rooms at the *Hôtel de l’Océan*?”

Beata looked in surprise at her brother. The huge trunks which the ladies had brought to Neuhaus had betokened a longer stay there.

Herr von Pansewitz was full of regret: “The host, your Grace, has telegraphed me that unfortunately my notice came too late, but he thinks that another hotel——”

“I hope you will go with us, my dear Lothar,” Princess Thekla interrupted the kindly old man, turning to Baron Gerold with even more amiability than she had yet shown him. “The memory of our dear

departed will attract you to the spot where you passed with her the short weeks of the time of your betrothal."

Lothar bowed with exceeding respect: "Excuse me, your Grace; I do not willingly revisit scenes which have sad associations for me; we are too apt to give to the past more than is its due, while it is a man's part to attain by every means at his command the outward and inward composure which enables him to perform his duty to the present. Moreover, I have been latterly convinced that my presence at Neuhaus is absolutely necessary, and it would be for the good of my estate in Saxony also that its master should visit it. It is only now," he went on, politely offering the Princess Helena a dish of confitures,—“now that I have been obliged to stay so long in southern countries, that I realize how dearly I love my own,—this bit of soil where I grew up. I really do not wish to stay away from it an hour longer."

The Princess cast a despairing glance towards the window; it might have been caused by the threatening clouds outside as well as by the obstinacy of her beloved son-in-law.

"A woman—a mother—regards the memory of the departed differently, of course," she said, coolly; "less heroically, begging your pardon, Baron."

"Your Grace," he replied, with warmth, "it would be lamentable were it otherwise. It is woman's privilege to indulge in the outward signs of grief as well as of joy. Her hands strew flowers on joyous occasions, and they deck the grave. What a lustre would fade from life were she more 'heroic'!"

The Princess Helena flushed crimson. What put it into her mother's head to leave here—now? The

fork in her hand trembled so that she had to lay it down.

"Good heaven!" exclaimed the Countess Moorsleben, "is your Grace not well?"

"Indeed—I am—I suddenly grew dizzy," stammered the Princess. "Excuse me,—I——"

She arose, and, putting her handkerchief to her eyes, left the room with a slight courtesy, signing to the Countess not to follow her. She flew up-stairs and into Frau von Berg's room.

"Alice!" she exclaimed, "mamma is talking of leaving. It is terrible! All is lost!"

Frau von Berg, who, in a light blue morning-gown trimmed with cream-coloured lace, was pacing her room to and fro with half-closed eyes, sniffing from time to time at her vinaigrette and lightly groaning, paused and forgot for a moment her rôle of invalid.

"Gerold refused to accompany mamma," the agitated little Princess went on, tearing at the lace of her pocket-handkerchief. "He suddenly raves over his German forests like a very peasant whom one would persuade to emigrate to America. What should I do at Ostend? Knowing, besides, that you are no longer here, Alice! I will not bear it!" She threw herself upon the lounge. "I will leap from the train on the way! I will throw myself into the sea! I——"

The Princess's white face, looking towards the spot where the motionless figure was standing in the gathering darkness, was in its distress altered almost beyond recognition.

"Oh, God!" she cried, when she received no answer. "All is lost! I am going, and she stays!" She began to weep passionately, burying her face in the cushions. "I feel it, Alice; he loves her! he loves her!" she sobbed.

Frau von Berg smiled. She no longer had any reason for forbearance; in her discomfiture she hated all these people, and felt something of the satisfaction with which an anarchist may possibly contemplate the probability of a small charge of dynamite's blowing an entire assemblage into the air, the innocent and the guilty alike.

"Shed no more idle tears, Princess," she said, coolly. "You must act. First of all, it seems to me, her Highness must be convinced that your Grace spoke advisedly yesterday. All will then arrange itself."

And in her mental vision Frau von Berg saw the entire clique fly into the air,—this childish, irresolute creature with the rest, for all she cared.

"But I cannot tell her! I cannot!" whispered the Princess. "I once saw a wounded doe, and she looked at me last night just as that poor creature did. I cannot! I could not sleep last night for thinking of it."

Frau von Berg shrugged her shoulders: "Then your Grace can go to Ostend, and leave the idyl here to develop undisturbed."

Outside, the hurricane blast that precedes a storm dashed leaves and sand against the window-panes, and tore at the linden boughs. The first vivid flash of lightning lit up the room for an instant, and showed the contemptuous face of the handsome woman who stood at the window looking out into the hurly-burly.

"I will write to her," the Princess said. "She would not listen to me." And after a pause, during which a clap of thunder shook the house, "I owe it to her; yes, I owe it to her; you are right, Alice. Come to my room; I am afraid."

Frau von Berg lit a candle on the writing-table, and conducted the Princess across the corridor to her room.

Upon her round white face there was an expression of extreme satisfaction. "At last!" she thought, clinching her fist. Every ray of compassion in her soul, had any such existed, would have been extinguished by the scene of the previous evening. How haughtily she had passed her by when Baron Gerold took her—Frau von Berg,—a born Czernetzky—to task! Why, her ancestors were Sobieskis! There was a gleam in her eyes; the Duke had spoken to her yesterday evening for the first time since long ago, and she had boldly ventured to remind him of certain past experiences. He had, when a young Prince, been desperately in love with her, and old love——

"What do you think, Alice?" the Princess interrupted her train of thought. "What shall I write?"

The girl was seated at the antique writing-table, with a sheet of paper stamped with the escutcheon of her family before her; but she had got no farther than 'Dear Elizabeth.'

"Your Grace must say that interest in her Highness's happiness induces you to explain your remark of yesterday evening; that you cannot answer it to your conscience, and so on; and then produce the proof."

The Princess turned away and wrote. The storm raged outside, and when a clap of thunder shook the house the girlish hand paused. Sometimes it would be passed across her brow, and the next instant the pen would fly over the paper. At last the note was handed to Frau von Berg, who still stood motionless in the middle of the room.

She approached the candle and read. "*Con passione*, of course," she said. "Really touching! And now his Highness's note." Her eyes had a cruel, cat-like gleam in them.

The Princess drew a chain from among the folds of her embroidered white gown, took the note out of the little case, and closed her hand upon it. A final struggle was going on within her. Frau von Berg leaned against the wall beside the table, playing with the tassel of her dressing-gown. "In fact," she said, slowly, without looking up, "she did look superb yesterday evening, this Claudine. There is a unique charm about those blonde women with dark-blue eyes." The little Princess hastily wrote the address upon her envelope.

At this moment Countess Moorsleben appeared, to summon Helena to her mother. The old Princess had a nervous attack, and was in the state in which she was liable to destroy whatever was at hand, to tear to pieces an innocent pocket-handkerchief or two, and to be lavish with abusive epithets. To-day she raged as did the storm outside. In half an hour the Princess came back to her room with red eyes. She had passively defied the storm of reproach with which she had been assailed. It certainly was not her fault that her mother could not breathe any longer in this heavy atmosphere, and that the Dowager Duchess had replied so coldly to her Grace's confidential communication. Why write to so formal and irreproachable a person?—one who, besides, had always been infatuated about Claudine? The candle on the writing-table had nearly burned to the socket, the pen she had flung down lay beside the inkstand, but—she put her hand to her forehead—the letter; where was the letter?

A tremor of anxiety sent her rushing across the corridor to Frau von Berg's room.

"Alice!" she called out in the darkness, "the letter! What have you done with the letter? I want to read it again!"

No reply.

"Alice!" she called, angrily stamping her foot.

All was silent.

Without thinking of her red eyelids, she ran downstairs; through the half-open hall door a deliciously refreshing breeze was blowing; it had stopped raining. A shadow was gliding to and fro on the stone pavement outside.

"Alice!" the Princess called for the third time, and hurried out, "the letter! Where is the letter?"

"Your Grace, I sent it immediately."

A half-stifled cry burst from the girl's lips. "Who told you to send it?" she stammered, seizing the lady by the shoulders.

"An excellent opportunity offered, your Grace," was the calm reply.

But the Princess's agitation was not allayed. "And how shall I say that that wretched note came into my possession?" she asked, wringing her hands.

"You found it," the lady replied.

"I never lie!" the girl said, and her delicate figure seemed to dilate. "I shall say that I got it from you; so help me God, I will tell the truth!"

"As your Grace thinks best. Then I shall have found the note," she replied. "I gave it to the groom whom the Baron sent to Fräulein von Gerold at Altenstein; he was to give it to Frau von Katzenstein, to whom I wrote a few lines asking her to hand the accompanying note to her Highness early to-morrow morning."

The Princess had grown quiet. She had clasped as a support the antique brass door-knocker, which shone in the pale moonlight, surmounted by the star-crowned stag. She could not think clearly, and she felt inexpressibly miserable

Frau von Berg knew perfectly well that the groom's errand had been from Beata to Claudine, but what need to tell this? Her words must add fuel to the flame.

The Princess re-entered the hall and paused there, possessed by a foreboding of evil, by a nameless horror.

Beata was coming from her brother's room, her basket of keys on her arm. "Princess!" she exclaimed, startled, "how ill you look!"

Then life returned to her. She hurried up-stairs into her room, and flung herself, all dressed as she was, upon her bed, where she lay through the night, half unconscious, dreading the dawn of the day.

When the storm burst forth, the Duchess sent for her children. The youngest nestled close to her as she sat propped up by pillows in bed; the eldest Prince stood boldly at the window, looking out into the flashing lightning; his younger brother Claudine held in her lap.

Beside his eldest son stood the Duke, listening to the rattle of the hail and gazing at the floods of water dashed against the window-panes; the Duchess talked to her baby; Frau von Katzenstein, the children's governess, and the lady's-maid were in the adjoining room.

When the thunder had ceased and the rain held up, the children were dismissed to the nursery. The heir looked Claudine in the face. "Were you afraid?" he asked.

She gently shook her head.

"I am glad," said the lad. "Mamma is always afraid."

The mother drew the boy towards her. "You like Claudine von Gerold very much?" she asked, with a melancholy smile.

"Yes, mamma," replied the child. "If I were big enough I would marry her."

No one laughed; the Duke at the window did not stir, and Claudine was embarrassed. The Duchess nodded. "Good-night, dear children; God guard you!"

When the sound of their footsteps had died away, she said, in a low voice, "I am very tired, Adalbert."

The Duke took his leave, kissing his wife's brow, and saying, "Wake up well to-morrow."

"I promise," she replied, pleasantly.

Claudine was to share the night watching with Frau von Katzenstein. She went to the room which had been assigned her, the same that had been hers when this house was her home, and put on a wrapper. Then she returned, to sit, silent and patient, beside the bed.

The Duchess lay with closed eyes. The night-clock ticked softly; the pictured Madonna gleamed faintly in the semi-darkness; the girl's eyes rested upon that lovely face, and then wandered to the pale countenance of the invalid. Then her head sank back, she closed her eyes, and meditated.

She was very weary from the agitations of the previous evening; dreamily half conscious, she saw herself with *his* child in her arms, felt his kiss of gratitude upon her hand, and smiled in her sleep. Starting, she sat upright, broad awake, a dread assailing her. The Duchess's eyes were gazing at her with a strange, searching look in them.

"Elizabeth," she said, shivering slightly, "can you not sleep?"

"No."

"Shall I read to you?"

"No, thank you."

"Would you like to talk? Shall I arrange your pillows for you?"

"Give me your hand, Claudine. Was I very disagreeable to-day?"

"Ah, Elizabeth, that you can never be!" exclaimed the girl, kneeling beside her.

"Yes, yes, I know it. But—but my heart is sick, and you must forgive me."

"Tell me, Elizabeth, have you had any sorrow?"

"No; I was only thinking of dying."

"Oh, do not think of *that*!"

"You know, Claudine, there is no cure for love and death. I do not think I fear to die; I am more afraid of living."

"Ah, you are ill, Elizabeth."

"Yes, yes; and I am so tired! You ought to sleep, and it is better for me to be alone. Please go. The maid is in the next room; if you stay here I cannot help looking at you."

Claudine kissed the feverishly hot hand and withdrew. Towards midnight she glided to the sick-room in her night-dress, and listened behind the silken curtains to know if the Duchess were sleeping. All was quiet; but at the soft rustle of her step the large dark eyes of the invalid opened, and slowly turned upon her with the same rigid, inquiring gaze as before. "What is it?" she asked.

Claudine approached. "I am worried about you," she said; "forgive me."

"Tell me," said the Duchess, inconsequently, "why did you at first not want to go to Neuhaus yesterday?"

Claudine was startled. "Why did I not want to go

to Neuhaus?" she repeated, blushing. Then she was silent. She could not possibly say, "Because I love Lothar, and because he distresses me whenever he sees me; because he distrusts me; because——"

The Duchess suddenly turned away: "No, no, I do not want an answer. Go, go!"

The girl walked towards the door.

"Claudine! Claudine!" The cry was one of heart-breaking distress. The invalid was again sitting up in bed, and stretching out her arms towards her with an imploring expression.

Claudine went to her, seated herself on the bed, and took the frail, trembling little creature in her arms.

"Elizabeth," she said, tenderly, "let me stay with you."

"Forgive me, ah, forgive me!" sobbed the Duchess, kissing the girl's dress, her long fair hair that hung loose behind her, and her eyes. "Tell me," she whispered, "and say it aloud, that you love me."

"I love you very dearly, Elizabeth," said Claudine, wiping away the large tears from the feverish cheeks as a mother would for her child. "You do not know how dearly."

The Duchess sank back exhausted: "I thank you. I am so tired!"

Claudine sat perfectly still for a while, and then, when she thought the invalid had fallen asleep, she softly withdrew her hand from her friend's clasp and left the room on tiptoe, pursued by an inexplicable dread. What was the matter with the Duchess? What did those searching glances, that coldness, and this passionate tenderness mean?

"She is ill," she said to herself.

She stood before the mirror to fasten up her loosened

hair. A doubt occurred to her, and the hand busy with the tortoise-shell pins fell at her side. Then she proudly tossed back the waves of gold. Neither she nor the Duchess was so petty as to pay any heed to gossip.

By a mysterious and inscrutable association of ideas the remembrance of the lost note suddenly flashed upon her mind, and a dull foreboding assailed her for a moment. Then she smiled; who could divine the woodland nook where it had probably mouldered away in the rain and dew?

She took the little prayer-book in which her mother used to read a sentence aloud to her every evening, opened it at random, and read, "Guard me, O Lord, from evil tongues, and defend me from my enemies. Let no evil befall me or mine, and let no plague come nigh our dwelling." Her thoughts flew to the peaceful house from the tower-chamber of which her brother's student-lamp shone out into the dark forest. Thence they wandered to the bedside of the motherless child at Neuhaus. "Protect it in future, O God Almighty, as Thou didst protect it last evening," she whispered, and her eyes sought the book again. "Have compassion on the sick who, sleepless, seek for ease on their couches, and on all the dying for whom this night is the last."

The book slipped from her hands, an icy shiver ran through her; the Duchess's distorted face suddenly rose before her. She turned and hid her own in the pillow; how came she to think of anything so terrible?

Only after a long while did she sit up, and with a shiver wrap herself in a coverlet. She left the lamp burning on the table; she could not stay in the dark.

The next morning was clear, golden, and deliciously fresh. The sun sparkled from millions of dew-drops on the spacious lawns of the Altenstein park, where a host of labourers were busy with preparations for a *fête*, and everything looked bright and merry. A pole was erected, upon the top of which sat a gaudily-painted bird; there was a merry-go-round, its horses covered with crimson housings; there was a puppet-show, and a red-and-white-striped tent, from the summit of which crimson pennons and flags were flying; in the shade a platform was put up for the musicians, and a planed floor for dancing:—all devised for the pleasure of little folk.

It was the heir's birthday, and this was a surprise prepared for him by his paternal grandmother, in addition to the charming little pony which had arrived the evening before and had been secretly conveyed to the stables.

An early despatch announced the arrival of the Dowager Duchess towards noon. At two o'clock the family were all to meet at table, and many invitations, chiefly to children, had been issued for the afternoon. Even little Elizabeth from the Owl's Nest, and Leonie, Baroness von Gerold, had received formal cards of invitation.

The Duchess's illness, and the storm of yesterday, had caused much anxiety. Could the *fête* take place? But, thank heaven, no postponement had been necessary; her Highness was better, and the weather was incomparable. All might reckon upon an interesting afternoon,—a continuation of the late entertainment at Neuhaus, which had been "simply divine," as "piquante as a chapter of Daudet," her Excellency Plassen declared to Countess Lilienstein as they were taking their

morning walk in the forest, and then the two ladies whispered together mysteriously, and her Excellency turned up her eyes.

"If she is only cunning enough he will marry her yet: the succession is secured," the lady observed at last.

"Never fear, my dear Countess, the Gerolds all know how to take care of themselves. The Baron will get the second Princess; he is amazingly modest——"

"Cunning, my dearest Countess."

"Ah! They are all on the most intimate footing; the Duke frequently calls him 'cousin.'"

"And well he may,—a double relationship." She laughed at her own jest.

"Does the Duchess really suspect nothing?" asked one of the gentlemen in the bowling-alley at the 'Trout,' where they had made up a small party for a game, "or does she ignore it intentionally?"

"Possibly. She is a clever woman," said Baron Elbenstein, poising a ball in his hand.

"But why?" remonstrated Major Baumberg. "The poor lady sees everything with regard to her husband in a golden light; she idolizes the Duke."

"That's the very reason; she would not deny him what would make him happy."

"Infernally handsome woman, the Gerold!"

"Charming!"

"Exalted above every breath!"

"And a genuine flirt."

"And cunning, cunning! Such a shrewd move! Runs away from her position at court to this wilderness just at the moment when her paternal estate is brought to the hammer. Clever, wasn't it? And he snapped at the bait," said a melancholy attaché.

His old Excellency with the venerable white head

lifted his bushy eyebrows in disapproval. "Her Highness is a woman of delicate sensibilities," he said, in a voice scarcely audible from chronic hoarseness. "Come, gentlemen, I must beg——"

But he was not heeded.

"We know all about it," exclaimed one, who had just made a ten-stroke.

Again his Excellency entered the lists for the girl who was so harshly judged, and tried to prove that it was all a baseless slander; but in the midst of his defence his voice failed him, he gasped once or twice, wiped his purple face, angrily drank his glass of beer, and abruptly left the calumniators.

"Incredible! Incredible!" he murmured to himself. And when he met a couple of young ladies who passed him talking together in a low voice, he looked crossly after them. "I'll bet they are whispering about that scandal. Green girls, with no judgment! I only wish that——" But his worthy Excellency might swear his deepest, he could not restrain the nods and whispers. They pursued their course, and the slander was breathed from ear to ear as the summer breeze floats from tree-top to tree-top; even the servants stuck their heads together, and it penetrated to all sorts of places. The swallows twittered it in their nests in the thatch of the cottages, and one neighbour detailed it to another. In one of the poorest little huts an old peasant-woman wrote with childlike confidence to *Fräulein von Gerold* begging her to intercede with the Duke to have her son released from military service; if *she* asked him, her request would surely be granted.

In the castle all were noiselessly stirring quite early. The pretty waiting-maid who answered Claudine's ringing of her bell brought her several letters.

"Do they know yet how her Highness is?" asked Claudine.

"Oh, wonderfully well. Her Highness has slept soundly, and is to give the Prince his presents at eleven o'clock in the red drawing-room."

"Thank God!"

Claudine sent the girl to the Princess's maid for further intelligence. After she had dressed she opened her letters. One was from Beata, who promised to look after little Elizabeth, and to bring her to the *fête* in the afternoon:

"I shall chaperon two nieces to the court ball. How grand that sounds, and how funny it is in reality! The little elves! God grant that her Highness may be better when you receive these lines! Lothar has been asked to dine with the ducal party. I wish, Claudine, that if he is going to woo another princess he would make his intentions clear. This dallying is very unlike him; he is wont to be so resolute. Perhaps now, when the old Princess is about leaving—— Ah, Claudine, I had fancied quite another sister-in-law! *Au revoir.*"

Claudine sadly laid the letter aside and mechanically opened the second. What a coarse, clumsy hand, and what an idea! Claudine smiled; she was asked to beg the Duke to release a poor mother's son from military duty. Suddenly she turned ashy pale. Good God! what an indication! How did this old peasant-woman come to think of *her*? This was the sort of letter the Duchess was accustomed to receive.

She haughtily held her head erect. Ridiculous! What ideas such people took into their heads! She determined to show the letter to the Duchess; it would amuse her.

Nevertheless, she was conscious of a sense of op-

pression. The stupid letter was like the prick of a needle at her heart.

Why was she not summoned to her Highness?

There was a knock at her door, and the kindly face of Frau von Katzenstein looked in. "May I come in?" she asked, as she entered. "Her Highness waked in such good spirits," she went on. "She wished to arrange the birthday-table herself. She took her breakfast in bed, and gave special orders that you, dearest Claudine, were not to be waked. The maid was told to lay out for dinner a red silk gown trimmed with lace, and now——"

"Is her Highness worse?" Claudine asked, breathlessly, hurrying to the door.

"Stop, dear child, and let me tell you. The Duchess had some letters early this morning, and suddenly—I had cut open the envelopes—I heard a strange sound in her room, like a deep sigh, and when I went in I found her lying back again, with closed eyes, among the pillows. I did what I could for her, but she said to me, in a strange, thick voice, 'Go away, my dear Katzenstein; I must be alone.' I went, with a protest, and when I tried to go to her again, she had locked her door,—a thing she never did before. His Highness has sent twice to know if she is ready to receive him; the Prince is bursting with impatience; the band is waiting in the garden for the signal to begin to play, and still there is nothing stirring in the Duchess's room."

"Good heavens! can she have had bad news from her sister?"

The old lady-in-waiting shrugged her shoulders: "Who knows?"

"Come, dearest Frau von Katzenstein. Her Highness was strangely excited yesterday."

In an instant the girl stood at the little tapestried door leading to her Highness's room and listened. Not a sound was to be heard. "Elizabeth!" she called, in a low, distressed voice.

The call was heard within. The Duchess, kneeling beside her bed, raised her head and looked wide-eyed towards the door, but her lips were firmly compressed. In her hand she held a little crumpled note. All doubt, all dread, was past. Repose had come with certainty, a terrible, stony-like repose, and with it pride, the pride of a royal princess, strong and powerful. No one should suspect how poor she had become.

Only this short rest she must have,—this one hour to soothe, to deaden her heart, thus mortally wounded. Was she not to be allowed even this?

"Elizabeth!" the call came again. "For the love of heaven! I am dying with anxiety!"

The Duchess rose and took a step forward, her hands pressed to her temples as in despair. Then she went to the door and opened it.

"What do you want?" she asked, coldly.

Claudine entered and saw before her the erect figure, and the eyes fixed and darkly glowing. "Elizabeth," she asked, softly, "what is the matter? Are you ill?"

"No; call my maid."

"Do not struggle so, Elizabeth. Lie down. You look feverish; you are suffering," stammered Claudine, aware of a terrible change. The smiling face was transformed to a rigid mask.

"Call my maid, and bring me a candle."

Claudine silently obeyed. The Duchess lit a paper at the flame and held it until the fire all but touched her transparent fingers; then she dropped it on the ground and put her foot upon it.

"There!" she said, laying her hand upon her heart and drawing a deep breath. Her eyes had for a moment an expression of great physical pain.

She allowed herself to be dressed, but insisted upon dark colours. Her face, with its two crimson spots beneath the eyes, looked very sallow above the plain dark violet gown. She was passive beneath her dressing-maid's hands, except that when she would have put a yellowish rose in her hair the Duchess tore out the flower impatiently and threw it on the ground.

"Roses!" she exclaimed, with an indescribable emphasis. Then she paused before the mirror as if lost in thought, while Claudine stood just behind her, looking extremely distressed.

At last the Duchess began to laugh: "Do you know the proverb '*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*'?" And, without waiting for an answer, she turned to the maid and said, "Inform his Highness that I am ready."

She beckoned to Claudine, and went with her through the boudoir to the red drawing-room. The apartment was filled with the fragrance of flowers; the presents were all arranged on a side-table,—toys, books, an exquisite little fowling-piece. In the centre of the table, in a richly-carved frame, was the picture of the Duchess. She took it up, her hand slightly trembling as she did so, and gazed at it as if it were something strange which she had never seen before.

"It is enchantingly like your Highness," said Frau von Katzenstein. "It looks so fresh, so happy."

"It is a bad picture," the Duchess rejoined, in a hard tone. "Take it away; it is false. I am not that."

Frau von Katzenstein glanced despairingly at Claudine as she left the room.

At this moment a footman opened the door, and the

heir entered, followed by the Duke carrying his youngest son in his arms and leading the second boy by the hand. The Prince was about to rush to his mother with a shout of joy, but he paused, as did the Duke, at sight of the strangely cold, erect figure in the dark nun-like dress.

She gazed into her husband's eyes as if to read the very depths of his soul. The music struck up below, outside; the solemn tones floated in through the window,—“Praise the Lord Almighty, King of Hosts.”

For a moment it seemed impossible for her to preserve her composure; she tottered, and, stooping, buried her face in her boy's curls. “Congratulate me, mamma,” the lad begged, impatiently; he was longing to go to his gifts.

“God bless you!” she whispered, and sat down in the chair which the Duke placed for her.

Claudine had withdrawn to a window in the next room when the Duke entered, as was her duty at a family festival of this kind when no one had asked her to remain. The joyous cries of the children mingled with the notes of the merry march which the band now played. “What, in heaven's name, is the matter with the Duchess?” she asked herself.

“Grandmamma! Grandmamma!” was soon the children's cry, and the girl started with a sense of relief and pleasure; her dear and honoured mistress, always so kind and good to her, had arrived. She longed to run to her to kiss her hand. And then she heard the gentle, kindly voice; but was there not a strange tone of pain in it?

“My dear child, my dear Elizabeth, how are you?”

For a while all was still. Then the same voice, with the same quiver of pain in it, said, “Altenstein

seems to have done you no good, Elizabeth; I shall take you with me to Bavaria."

"Oh, I am quite well," the Duchess replied aloud. "So well! You would not believe, mamma, how much I can bear."

The noisy music outside drowned all further conversation.

Claudine stood as on burning coals. Was the Dowager Duchess not going to ask after her? She knew that her favourite was here; Claudine had written to her that it was so. To be sure, she had received no answer; for the first time this struck her as strange. Again the inexplicable distress of the early morning overcame her.

In the next room it gradually grew quiet; the Dowager Duchess had probably retired to take some rest after her long drive; the children had been sent to their nursery. The only sound was that of his Highness's footsteps as he paced the room impatiently.

"Claudine!" the Duchess called. She must learn to endure seeing the two together. And when Claudine appeared she looked from her to the Duke. How perfect was their self-command! His Highness scarcely glanced at the beautiful girl.

They must have had immense practice in dissimulation. Oh, no, they had had an easy time with so confiding and credulous a fool as herself. For a moment she was possessed by burning jealousy,—by a desire to annihilate at one blow the girl who stood beside her.

"Hand his Highness that glass of wine, Claudine," she said. "His Highness has forgotten that I offered it to him before."

Claudine obeyed.

As she did so the Duchess rose and left the room.

She was afraid of bursting into that terrible laughter which threatened to stifle her.

"What is the matter with the Duchess?" asked the Duke, frowning, as he emptied his glass.

"I do not know, your Highness," replied Claudine.

"Follow her Highness," he said, curtly.

"Her Highness has gone to her bedroom and does not wish to be disturbed; she wishes to see Fräulein von Gerold in an hour in the green drawing-room," the lady's-maid said, entering at that moment.

Claudine walked to another door and went to her room.

In the Duchess's apartment the curtains were closed, and in the dim light her Highness lay on her lounge. She knew that Claudine was alone with him. He would kiss her hand and draw her to him and say, "Bear with her caprice, my love; she is a sick woman; endure for my sake." And in the eyes of both would gleam the hope of a happier future; when in the vault of the castle chapel a new coffin——

She did not shudder at the thought: she only smiled; it is so good to know that the end must come! Ah, how many a bitter grief lies at rest with those sleeping in that vault!

It is such a comfort that forgetfulness and sleep come finally, however long this waking which we call life may last.

She felt something of the self-reproach which assails a sensitive person aware of making too great a demand upon the patience of others, and who yet cannot help it. And then the oppression of the chest;—it was so hard to breathe.

"If it were not for the children!"

Well, they would scarcely miss a suffering, invalid

mother, and they were boys. How well that was! No poor little motherless princess.

And the outside world. Did it know? Did people smile and whisper about the betrayed woman who kept as her friend the woman whom her husband loved? She groaned; the oppression of her chest increased.

Again she rose, and, with her hands clasped upon her breast, wandered about the room. There was nothing for her to do but to be proud, proud and careful.

If the day were only over! If the night were but come, when she could be alone and weep!

Outside, the carriages were rolling into the courtyard; steps were heard in the corridor, trains rustled; the guests betook themselves to the apartment adjoining the old Gerold banqueting-hall, in a building which connected the two wings of the castle.

Claudine, sitting motionless in an arm-chair in her room, heard it all. At every step she turned her head, and when it passed her face flushed for an instant. Why did the Dowager Duchess not send for her? Why at least did not Fräulein von Bohlen, her successor with the old Duchess, come to see her? It was the custom for such visits to be paid. And the pale, weary-looking young lady with sandy hair and freckles had already been half an hour with Frau von Katzenstein.

Before her, on the table, lay her watch. At a quarter of two she must go to the green drawing-room, where the Duchess awaited her, and accompany her to receive the guests. She had changed her dress; she wore a short summer gown which the Duchess had given her a few days previously,—a pale-blue foulard trimmed with lace, and with ornaments of silver, each

representing an edelweiss. The fan of blue ostrich-feathers lay beside the long tan-coloured gloves. She slowly drew on the latter; it was time to go.

In the corridor she came face to face with Fräulein von Bohlen, who was apparently going to her mistress's apartment. The two ladies had met at court festivals, and Fräulein von Bohlen had been sometimes invited to join the Dowager Duchess's circle of intimates. Her father, a former chamberlain of the deceased Duke, had made himself obnoxious to his successor by various intrigues, and had been obliged to retire to private life in circumstances the reverse of brilliant. Her old Highness supported the family, who considered themselves very ill used. Her gentle disposition forgave and forgot the annoyance inflicted upon her family, and she appointed Fräulein von Bohlen to the post left vacant by Claudine.

Fräulein von Bohlen's sandy head seemed held erect by a kind of cramp; she was quite unable to incline it by way of greeting. Claudine, who, in her own kindly courteous way, held out her hand, suddenly found herself alone. The young lady's cream-coloured train swept by her without stopping, and vanished behind the old oaken folding-doors at the end of the corridor.

Claudine turned calmly away and went into the little antechamber adjoining the Duchess's apartments. Frau von Katzenstein's face was comical enough, at once kindly, compassionate, and embarrassed.

"Her Highness has given no sign of life as yet," she stammered, and then paused; the Duchess appeared on the threshold of her room. Her first glance was at her friend. Claudine had perhaps never looked more beautiful than in that simple girlish costume.

Her Highness gently inclined her head and walked

through the room to the opposite door; from behind it were audible the Duke's suppressed tones and the cold voice of the Princess Thekla.

The Duchess paused. "Give me your arm, Claudine," she said, almost hoarsely, and thus, side by side, followed by Frau von Katzenstein, they entered the room beneath the crimson portière, which the attendants drew aside. In the apartment, where there were at present about twenty people, profound silence reigned for a moment.

Was that the Duchess?

A delicate little figure, half concealed behind a large fan-palm, clutched at the crimson velvet curtain, as if for support; her trembling knees almost refused to obey her as she made a profound courtesy. At a sign from her mother the Princess Helena advanced, but her dark head was inclined in vain,—there was no kiss for her to-day from her cousin the Duchess.

They did not sit down, but stood in groups conversing. Baron Gerold's eyes never left Claudine; the Duchess's hand still lay upon her arm. The girl was looking towards the opposite door, and her lovely face flushed with pleasure as the Dowager Duchess made her appearance.

To-day there was something unusually hard in the kindly, wrinkled face beneath the bands of snowy hair. But Claudine did not see it. Supported by the girl's arm, the Duchess approached her mother-in-law and bent above the hand extended to her, while Claudine courtesied low. The girl's eyes sparkled with joyous expectation at sight of her old friend.

"Ah, Fräulein von Gerold, I am surprised to see *you* here. Did you not tell me that your brother could not possibly dispense with your society?"

The old lady had clasped her hands, after greeting her daughter-in-law, and as she spoke the last words she looked towards Frau von Katzenstein as if Claudine had not been present.

Claudine proudly retired, and for a second her eyes encountered those of her cousin. There was breathless silence, except for the old voice, now so kindly, addressing her 'dear Katzenstein.'

Claudine did not look around: a paralyzing dread possessed her; she tried to speak, but at this moment the doors were opened. The heir, who to-day was to have the honour of escorting his grandmother to table, presented himself with a bow of much solemnity before the old lady, and the next moment the Dowager Duchess's silver-gray train rustled over the carpet.

"Will your Highness permit me to retire?" stammered Claudine, turning to the Duchess. "My severe headache——"

For an instant pity stirred in the heart of the unhappy woman for the girl whose ghastly, pale face bore witness to her intense agitation.

"No," she whispered,—his Highness passed them at that moment,—"I am ill myself, and must endure and struggle. Come too."

Claudine walked along the corridor with the rest and entered the reception-room with Lothar, just behind the ducal party. Their Highnesses greeted their guests, the heir received their congratulations, and then the doors into the dining-hall were thrown open. Claudine's seat was opposite Lothar. She had a very vague idea of the progress of the dinner; she answered her neighbours' questions, she ate and drank, but it was all as if in a dream. The Princess Helena, beside Baron Lothar, talked for a while very rapidly and then sat

mute ; sometimes her sparkling black eyes glanced over at Claudine while she played with her dessert-spoon. And when she encountered Claudine's strangely absent gaze, she turned red, and resumed her forced gaiety.

And—how it was, who can divine?—it hovered in the air, it foamed in the champagne-glasses; looks and gestures told it without a word; every one at the glittering table knew it. In the royal apartments something had occurred; the Dowager Duchess had come to interfere. There would be an end of the ideal friendship; the lovely Gerold was here for the last time.

It had a paralyzing effect upon all these apparently merry people, like a tempest the outbreak of which is desired, and yet dreaded. His Highness seemed very irritable; and no wonder. The Duchess, contrary to her wont, looked flushed; she often passed her handkerchief across her brow and drank ice-water.

At last the Duchess arose; dinner was at an end, and coffee was served in an adjoining room.

"Her Highness has retired, and wishes to see you," Frau von Katzenstein whispered to Claudine.

The girl flew up the stairs and along the corridor. Certainty was all she desired. What had she done?—how had she transgressed? And yet she was haunted by a terrible foreboding.

The Duchess sat on her lounge, her head leaning against the back of it.

"I want to ask you," she began, with her lips tightly drawn; then she shrieked, "Oh, Christ!—I—Claudine!" and the blood gushed from her mouth.

The young girl held her in her arms, neither trembling nor speaking, while the maid rushed away for assistance. The Duchess was entirely unconscious.

In a moment the physician, the Duke, and the

Dowager Duchess appeared. The invalid was put to bed; soon the feverish restlessness usual in such cases set in. Claudine, her face pale with horror, her dress stained with blood, was all unheeded; whenever she stretched out a hand to help, no one seemed to notice it, or even to see it.

"Has anything occurred to disturb her Highness?" asked the physician.

The Duke motioned towards Claudine: "Fräulein von Gerold, you were with her last; do you know?"

"I cannot conceive," she replied.

At that moment the old Duchess's eyes encountered the girl's. There was stern disapproval in them, but Claudine met the look with the fearlessness of innocence. "I know of nothing," she repeated.

Below, the concert began. The Duke hastily left the sick-room to put a stop to its continuance; in the corridor he encountered the Princess Helena. She was breathless from running; she had heard the dreadful tidings in the garden, and her terrified eyes spoke more plainly than words could have done.

"Your Highness," said the physician, who had followed the Duke, "it would be better to telegraph to H—— for Professor Thalheim. Her Highness is very weak."

The Duke looked dismayed; he had grown pale.

"Not dying! For God's sake, not that!" whispered Helena. And she turned away in horror as Claudine appeared in her blood-stained gown.

In her room Claudine met Beata: "Good heavens, how terrible!" she exclaimed. "You will see, my dear, that this will all be laid to the account of our *fête*."

"Ah, no," said the girl, softly, beginning to change her dress.

"Do not be so distressed, Claudine; you look wretched. Down-stairs everything is in the wildest confusion. I sent the nurse with Leonie and Elizabeth far away into the park. A few people are still near the castle, eager, of course, to know the why and the wherefore. The Princes are in their nursery; the heir is crying most piteously. Who would have thought it?"

"Will you be kind enough to take me in your carriage, Beata?" asked Claudine.

Beata, who was arranging her bonnet before a mirror, turned hastily: "You want to leave now, Claudine? You cannot."

"But I can, and will——"

"Her Highness wishes to speak to Fräulein von Gerold," the Duchess's maid knocked at the door to say.

"There, you see, Claudine, you cannot go away," said Beata, with undisguised satisfaction, as she tied the strings of her bonnet.

It was quiet and dark in the sick-room. Every one had been sent away; the Duke was pacing the ante-chamber with inaudible footsteps. Claudine sat on a chair at the foot of the couch, whither the Duchess had motioned her by a wave of her hand; in a faint whisper she begged her to stay, as she had something important to discuss with her.

Below, in the Prince's room, the Princess Helena was crouching on the carpet beside the slender lad; she was not crying, but her hands were clasped, as if asking forgiveness of some one. Princess Thekla was in the apartments of the Dowager Duchess. The old lady, profoundly agitated, was sitting in a large arm-chair, the back of which still bore the Gerold escutcheon; she scarcely listened to what her Grace was say-

ing. She was shocked at the condition in which she had found 'Liesel.'

"Yes; such agitations of mind——" sighed the old Princess. "It is wellnigh inconceivable. She is a positive intriguer, this soft-spoken Claudine!"

"My dear cousin," the venerable Duchess rejoined, "the knowledge is as old as human experience, that in such cases the larger half of the blame is the man's; let us remember this, if you please."

"But why do they tolerate her here any longer?" said the Princess, still further irritated by this reply, her sallow complexion growing a shade darker.

"Please to remember, *ma chère*, that his Highness alone is master here."

"Of course. Pardon me, but it is strange, when we think——"

"Yes; but there are cases when it is better not to think, cousin," was the reply, uttered with a sigh.

"Baron Gerold begs the favour of an interview with your Highness concerning a matter of much importance," announced Fräulein von Bohlen at this juncture.

Her Highness assented immediately. The next moment Lothar entered the room. Princess Thekla smiled amiably at him and rose: "A private audience? I will withdraw."

"Your Grace's presence would in no wise interfere with the request I wish to lay at her Highness's feet, inasmuch as your Grace will take a certain degree of interest in my proposal."

Her Highness glanced keenly at him from beneath her lace cap. "What is it, Gerold?" said she.

Fräulein von Bohlen, as she slowly withdrew, knew from the weary air of her kindly mistress, usually so ready to give counsel and advice, that she was reluctant to allow her thoughts to stray from the Duchess's sick-bed. The young lady courtesied with the melancholy, compassionate expression of countenance which she had assumed of late, indeed from the day when she had seen her mistress's eyes swimming in tears over a letter. And yet her sensations were far from melancholy: the secret dread lest Claudine should one day resume her position, and she herself be obliged to return to her shabby home with its parsimonious existence, no longer tormented her; never again would the Dowager Duchess, with her strict notions of morality, desire to have about her the girl who had laid a sacrilegious hand upon the most sacred of ties and had disturbed the domestic-peace of the reigning family. She smiled when she found herself alone, and her thoughts busied themselves with the future whilst, standing at the window, she gazed abroad over the sunny garden. What mattered to her the pain and anguish of others? She knew one thing only: never more should she be forced to hear every penny discussed at home; never more should she be obliged to pass with an air of proud indifference the shops where long accounts were owing, for which she was dunned every week; never more should she have to clean her gloves with benzine, nor to hear the servant complain to her high-born mamma that she was starved. She was firmly established now in the excellent position of a lady-in-waiting, and Claudine von Gerold, the 'charming, ever-to-be-remembered Claudine,' whose hand had been 'as gentle as that of a daughter,' had become impossible! What did the haughty creature want?

She had found a powerful protector. Fräulein von Bohlen suddenly blushed ; she would fain have changed places with Claudine von Gerold.

All was quiet in the next room. Now and then Baron Gerold's voice was raised ; on a sudden a shrill burst of laughter from the Princess Thekla was heard, and the next moment the tall, spare figure of her Grace in its rustling silk stood beside the startled lady-in-waiting.

"Princess Helena ! Find the Princess for me !" she panted, and the hand holding her ivory fan shook as with fever.

Fräulein von Bohlen flew to do her bidding, and the Princess Helena, breathless with haste, appeared.

"We are going instantly to Neuhaus. Where is the Countess ?"

"In heaven's name, mamma, what has happened ?" Helena well understood the mood which her mother's face betokened.

"Come !" was the reply.

"No, mamma, dearest mamma, leave me here ! I cannot bear my anxiety at Neuhaus !" the Princess implored.

"Who told you you would have to bear it there ? We are going to Berlin this evening by the express train. Come !"

"No, I cannot !" came from the pale lips. "Do not try to force me. I should escape from you on the way. I cannot leave here !"

Anger mastered the old Princess ; she seized the girl's delicate arm in a hard grasp. "*En avant !*" she exclaimed. "There is nothing more for us to do here !"

But her daughter extricated herself. "I am doing

my duty!" she cried, almost beside herself, and fled from the room. When the old lady followed her it seemed as if the air had absorbed the little white figure, so silent and deserted was the corridor.

The Princess Thekla drove to Neuhaus, accompanied by the Countess only. The carriage holding Beata and the children rolled along the road before her, and the joyous shouts of her little grand-daughter resounded in her ears.

The Countess wore a very pale face when she joined Frau von Berg. The young girl was outraged by the treatment she had received at the hands of her Grace during the drive. "Oh, I wish I could go directly back to mamma!" she cried. "How could I help her Highness's hemorrhage?"

Frau von Berg's face had worn its perpetual smile, but at this she grew grave. "A hemorrhage?" she asked.

"Yes; and a very serious one. They have telegraphed to H——."

"And Princess Helena?"

"She would not come; she seems to wish to spend her time on the threshold of the sick-room."

"And where is the Baron?"

"With the Dowager Duchess; at least he was when we came away. The Bohlen said he had begged the Dowager Duchess for an audience."

"And Fräulein von Gerold?"

The pretty Countess shrugged her shoulders: "Every one is talking about her; I am sorry for her. They say the Duchess has discovered her husband's infidelity; his Highness looks as if he would like to annihilate humanity."

"Good heavens! that scandal had to come to light

some time," said Frau von Berg. "But where in the world is she at present? In the tower at the Owl's Nest, spying over at Altenstein? or has she thrown herself into the pond in the park,—the haughty Claudine?"

Countess Moorsleben gazed in the face of the woman, who could not conceal her satisfaction. A savage joy gleamed in the black eyes,—not the joy of the just at the confusion of the evil-doer.

"Frau von Berg," said the pretty Countess, maliciously, "I have been trying all the morning to remember the origin of the proverb, 'People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.'"

"I asked you, Countess, what became of Fräulein von Gerold after so striking a display of the ducal displeasure?"

"I do not understand you, dear Frau von Berg," the Countess replied, as gently as she could. "You know more than I do. Displeasure? Striking display? Fräulein von Gerold is sitting at her Highness's bedside."

Frau von Berg gasped for breath and rustled into her Grace's apartment, the bell in which had just been ringing a perfect alarum.

The Duchess was sleeping; profound silence reigned throughout the spacious mansion.

Baron Gerold was sitting in the room of Captain von Rinkleben; he had asked permission of the kindly officer to await here the next intelligence with regard to her Highness's health. He had lighted a cigar, and then let it go out; he had taken up a book, but he was

not sufficiently calm to read. His face expressed great distress, and a tormenting unrest urged him to pace the room incessantly.

Herr von Palmer had bolted his door; he was in the worst possible humour. This was a delightful day, forsooth! In the morning when he had gone to his Highness's study to discuss some necessary changes and additions in the royal residence in the capital, the Duke had received him with an air of surprise, and an open letter. It was a confidential communication from Prince Leopold, his cousin, and it asked how it happened that for three years no payments had been made by the Duke's High Steward to the firm of Schmidt & Bros., of R. on the Rhine. The head of the firm had now entreated the intercession of the Prince, since all direct appeals resulted only in fresh orders, while any reference to the outstanding account was evaded. Nay, in the last communication the firm had been informed that any further appeal would be followed by the withholding of all further orders. Herr von Palmer had smiled and said that there must be some gross misunderstanding; his Highness, however, had with great decision expressed the wish that this matter should be arranged as soon and as perfectly as possible.

It was very unpleasant, very! As if such a pack of tradesfolk could expect anything save to give credit to all eternity! at least until Herr von Palmer, after some years, should be in condition to depart upon his travels. It was a consolation to have the Berg for an ally. How brilliant had been her scheme for making the beautiful Gerold 'impossible' on the Prince's birthday! The old Duchess had dropped Claudine; even his Highness would not have the courage to carry on his love-

affair beneath his mother's eye. Wonderful! Quite wonderful!

Through the high, broad window in the Duchess's bedroom the last rays of the setting sun were streaming.

"Claudine," whispered a weary voice.

The girl, who had been sitting lost in sorrowful thought, rose and kneeled beside the bed. "How are you now, Elizabeth?" she asked.

"Oh, better—better; I feel that the end is near."

"Do not talk so, Elizabeth!"

"Is there any one here to overhear us?"

"No, Elizabeth; his Highness has gone to the little Princes, the dressing-maid is in the next room, Frau von Katzenstein is with the Dowager Duchess, and the Sister who has been summoned to nurse you is asleep over her book of devotion."

The sick woman lay motionless, her eyes following the red spot of sunlight on the picture of the Madonna as it crept higher and higher, glittering at last upon the carving of the gilt frame, and then vanished.

"Why had you no confidence in me?" she suddenly asked, sadly. "Why did you not tell me frankly everything, everything?"

"Elizabeth, I had nothing to conceal from you."

"Do not lie, Claudine!" the Duchess exclaimed, solemnly. "No falsehood should be told to a dying woman!"

Claudine raised her head proudly: "I have never lied to you, Elizabeth."

A bitter smile hovered upon her Highness's pale, emaciated face.

"Your every look has lied to me!" was uttered with terrible distinctness and coldness, "for you love my husband."

A cry interrupted her, and Claudine's head dropped heavily upon the red silk coverlet of the bed. What she had feared had come to pass; she learned it from the lips of the woman whom she so dearly loved.

"I do not reproach you, Claudine; I only want you to promise me that after my death——"

"Merciful God!" the girl groaned as she rose, "who has aroused in your mind such terrible mistrust of me?"

"Mistrust? Rather ask, Who opened my eyes to perceive the terrible truth? And *he* loves you,—he loves you!" the Duchess went on, in a whisper. "Oh, God, it is so natural!"

"No! no!" Claudine cried, almost beside herself as she wrung her hands.

"Hush! hush!" the invalid begged, wearily; "let us talk quietly; I have still so much to say."

Claudine felt dizzy. What should she do to prove her innocence?

A flush coloured the invalid's cheeks; she breathed with difficulty.

"Elizabeth, believe me, trust me only this once!" implored the girl.

The Duchess suddenly sat up in bed. "Can you swear," she asked, calmly,—"*can you swear that there never has been a word of love spoken between the Duke and yourself? Swear this, swear it by your mother's memory, and if you can do so here at my death-bed I will believe you, and shall know that my eyes played me false.*"

Claudine stood paralyzed; her lips moved as if to speak, but no sound issued from them, and her head suddenly drooped as if she felt annihilated.

The Duchess sank back among her pillows. "*That courage you still lack,*" she murmured.

"Elizabeth!" the girl entreated, "believe me! believe me! Good God, what can I do to induce you to have faith in me? I tell you again, you are mistaken!"

"Hush!" said the Duchess, with a contemptuous smile.

His Highness entered at this instant. "How are you now, Liesel?" he asked, kindly; and, leaning over her, he tried to stroke the hair aside from her damp brow.

"Do not touch me!" she gasped, her eyes opening wide in terror. "It will soon be over," she whispered.

Claudine was leaning in despair against the door. The Duke approached her, and asked, in a low, distressed voice, "Is her Highness delirious?"

The girl suppressed the sobbing cry which threatened to break from her lips, and tottered into the next room.

He followed her in much agitation: "What has happened?"

The sick woman's eyes followed them to the door behind which they disappeared. All her fearful, suppressed agony convulsed her and bewildered her poor thoughts; she lay with clinched hands and burning eyes. What! could they not have some consideration for a dying woman? And she had meant so kindly by them. She meant to arrange in her last will that they should belong to each other in future. That was to be her revenge for her ruined happiness. And she, *she*,—what an abyss of turpitude the girl's soul must be, when she could still appeal to heaven to bear witness to her innocence!

A desperate, stifling dread oppressed her aching breast. Her husband re-entered the room and stood at the foot of the bed, looking at her with a strange

inquiry in his eyes. Claudine, who had regained her composure, brought a glass of some mixture. "Drink this, Elizabeth," she begged, as she leaned over her and put her arm beneath her head. "Drink this; you are so warm; it is what always refreshes you."

The Duchess lay motionless, with compressed lips, her large eyes first fixed upon the girl's pale face and then turned towards her husband. The glass in Claudine's hand began to tremble. "Ah, please drink!" she entreated, in a failing voice.

There came a shrill scream, and the glass was hurled from Claudine's hand.

"Poison!" the Duchess shrieked, sitting erect in bed, with the expression of a maniac, and with extended arms. "Poison! Help! Am I not dying quickly enough for you?"

She sank back exhausted, a fresh stream of blood from her parted lips dyeing her night-dress and the bed.

Claudine, who had fallen upon her knees, sprang up; she, too, looked almost insane. By a superhuman effort, she controlled herself, rang the bell, and then helped to raise the sick woman and lean her upon the breast of the Duke, whose pale face showed him to be profoundly agitated.

"Liesel!" he murmured. "Why, Liesel—— Almighty God!——"

She lay with closed eyes, as if dying.

There was a stir in the room. The old physician appeared, and looked extremely anxious. He consulted the clock, felt the patient's weak pulse, and shook his head. "At nine o'clock Professor Thalheim will be here, your Highness," he whispered to the weeping Dowager Duchess; "but until then there must be rest, entire rest, with no show of anxiety in the manner of those

around the Duchess, who should be attended as usual. Meanwhile, I will remain in the next room."

"Claudine!" whispered the sick woman. "Claudine!"

The Dowager Duchess looked around for the girl; she had vanished. In her distress the old lady went out into the corridor and asked her way to Fräulein von Gerold's room. But the door was locked, and nothing was stirring inside.

Claudine was prostrate in her room, incapable of one distinct thought. Had it come to this?—to this? The world thought her a fallen woman, the Duke's mistress! His own wife was dying in this delusion!

Oh, the arrogant folly of her insane pride! If she could summon the stars from the heavens as witnesses of her purity, no one would believe her, no one,—neither the dying nor the living,—nor *he*, he whose warning she had rejected. God alone knew her innocence, and He no longer works miracles. Lost! Lost! She had become the blot on the scutcheon of her family; the whole country would point the finger of scorn at her with, "Look, look, that is she who broke our poor Duchess's heart!"

Who could save her? The Duke? He could not enter the lists for her; they would all pretend to believe him, and laugh in their sleeves. Merciful God, what had she done to be so hated, so bitterly hated?

If she could but die! She could not then wipe out her disgrace, but she should be dead, no longer able to feel. She thought and thought, and a voice within seemed to suggest the little lake in the park. How quiet and cool it was there,—so cool! They would perhaps find her there, and people would say, "She had some sense of honour left, that Claudine,—she

could not live with guilt upon her soul!" One only would surely say, standing beside her coffin, "My sister, my pure, proud darling, I believe in you!"

And in Neuhaus, a delicate brunette would lean her head upon its master's shoulder, and a sweet voice would declare, "What do I care, Lothar, for the stain brought upon your name by one of your race? Forget it. I love you in spite of it."

A knock at her door startled her.

"Fräulein von Gerold,"—it was Fräulein von Bohlen who spoke,—"the Dowager Duchess wishes to see you."

She walked out into the corridor mechanically, forgetting that her hair was loose and falling down, some golden strands hanging across her brow, forgetting that she had on a loose morning-wrapper. As one in a dream she entered the apartment, where the candles had not yet been lit, and where upon the bright rug the moonlight lay in two broad, gleaming strips.

"Claudine!" said a gentle voice from the window.

She crossed the room and courtesied.

"Sit down, Claudine."

But she made no movement to obey. She stood as if paralyzed. "Is the Duchess dying?" she asked, hoarsely.

"Her life is in God's hand, Claudine."

"Oh, through me! through me!" the girl murmured.

The Duchess made no reply. "I have a question to put to you, Claudine," the old lady began at last, "a strange question at this moment, when the angel of Death is knocking at the door of the house; but he for whom I ask it has made it my duty to do so immediately. Baron Gerold begs you, Claudine, to replace the mother of his orphaned child,—to be his wife."

"Ah, your Highness!" Claudine all but shrieked,

recoiling a step and leaning heavily against the frame of the window. "I thank him and decline," she said. "I require no sacrifice of him."

"Very good!" the old Duchess rejoined, sternly. "You have it in your power to silence at one stroke all slanderous tongues; you have it in your power to restore to life for a while a fleeting existence, that it may fade away in peace."

"Your Highness!" groaned the girl.

"My poor, unhappy daughter!" sighed the old lady.

"I would give my life for the Duchess, your Highness; but do not ask *this* humiliation of me!"

"Your life? That is easily said, Claudine."

"Oh that I could prove it!" she exclaimed, confronting the old Duchess with clasped hands. She stood just in the full light of the moon, which revealed the utter despair in her eyes, in her entire figure.

The Duchess was startled. "But, Claudine, Claudine!" she said, soothingly.

"Does your Highness really believe me dishonoured?" she asked. The question was put brokenly, hurriedly.

"No, my child; Baron Gerold would never ask a dishonoured woman to be his wife."

She recoiled. "Ah, it is only for that!" she stammered.

"I found it very hard to put any faith in the scandal," the old lady continued. "But, child, I know life, I know my son's inflammable temperament, and his power over the hearts of women; and you who fled from him,—you I knew to be suddenly thrown with him daily. Child, child, I believe that you are only the Duchess's friend; but you have arrogantly ventured to risk your reputation. You have failed to avoid the

appearance of evil, and therefore you should take the hand which is held out to you," she added, earnestly. "No one will dare, not even the most slanderous, to declare that Lothar von Gerold takes a woman to his heart who is not pure as snow. And he—my son—would never let his eyes rest upon one who belonged to another."

"I am incapable of deciding, your Highness."

"You must decide, my child; Baron Lothar is waiting below, a prey to hope and fear."

"Your Highness," implored the girl, "he does not love me; he is making a sacrifice to the honour of our name. I *cannot* accept it. Have pity upon me!"

"Sacrifice yourself!" exclaimed the illustrious lady, irritated by opposition. "Is your honour not worth such a sacrifice? Is she, now lying there struggling with death, not worth it?"

"Your Highness," whispered Claudine, and a sudden thought shot through her poor, tortured brain, "I will—I will speak with Baron Gerold."

The Duchess took pity upon the wretched girl; she poured out a glass of water and brought it to her. "Calm yourself first, and then he shall come," she said, gently.

"The Herr Medizinalrath," Fräulein von Bohlen announced, entering at the moment, while close behind her appeared the physician's short figure.

"Your Highness must excuse my intrusion," he began, hurriedly. "I consider it my duty to inform your Highness that our illustrious patient is in extreme peril. Her Highness is exhausted to the point of death by loss of blood. Professor Thalheim advises transfusion; I do not disapprove. No means should be left untried. His Highness is determined to supply the

required blood ; but, since it is always a delicate operation,—it may have consequences, such as blood-poisoning, and so forth, which would imperil life,—we cannot avail ourselves of his Highness's resolve ; in the family annals it is expressly forbidden——”

He hesitated. Claudine hastily approached him and held out her hand : “ Herr Medizinalrath, I entreat to be allowed to be the one to——”

“ You ? ” the old man asked, looking with amazement at the girl's pale face, now full of beseeching earnestness. “ You, Fräulein von Gerold ? Well, then, come instantly ! There is no time to lose. But stay. I must remind you that we must open an artery.”

“ Ah, my dear doctor ! ” said Claudine, in a tone and with a shrug that seemed to say, ‘ If that be all ! ’ She hurried on before him, forgetting all etiquette in her dread lest another should precede her.

The old Duchess had scarcely comprehended. Transfusion ? What is transfusion ? When she entered the young Duchess's antechamber both physicians were busied about the patient. Beside Claudine stood the Sister, rolling up the sleeve of the girl's white cachemire morning-gown. The old lady laid her hand on her son's shoulder ; he had just retired from his wife's bedside to the antechamber, where Frau von Katzenstein and the dressing-maid were standing with faces of distress.

“ Adalbert,” she asked, in a whisper,—“ Adalbert, what does this mean ? The doctor said they must open an artery. Is it to pour her blood into Liesel's veins ? ”

He nodded absently ; his eyes never moved from the girl's face with its melancholy smile.

“ In heaven's name, Adalbert,” the old Duchess went

on, "can we allow Fräulein von Gerold—— It seems a very dangerous thing."

He turned and looked at her. "Does it not?" he asked, bitterly, in a low tone. "It requires rather more courage than is needed to shoot from some secure hiding-place the arrow which will mortally wound a poor woman and besmirch the reputation of an innocent girl. I cannot prevent her from thus sacrificing herself," he went on, shrugging his shoulders,—“I least of all, lest it should be said I cared more for *her* life than for my wife's."

The Sister now closed the curtains; Claudine's white, lovely figure alone was seen for an instant in the middle of the room, looking like a sacrificial priestess of mercy. "Arm to arm, doctor," the professor's voice said; "it is surer."

But the Duke neither saw nor heard: he had left the room. He was pacing the Duchess's drawing-room to and fro in intense agitation; the apartment was the same in which he had told Claudine of his passion. At this moment he would have given years of his life to obliterate the memory of that hour. "Poor girl! Poor woman!" *This* he had not meant. He had snatched at this pleasure with the eagerness of a man accustomed to conquer. He had conceived a genuine passion for his mother's beautiful lady-in-waiting; she had repulsed him, and he had accepted the repulse; for the first time he had bowed before a woman of strong character; but his fault had brought a fate with it. Who, in the name of heaven, could have slandered Claudine to the Duchess?

A single candle was burning in the candelabrum upon the chimney-piece, just as on that ill-fated evening.

His Highness's forehead was covered with cold

moisture. "Oh for only time enough," he muttered, "to explain to her! time enough to prevent her from dying in the belief that I am guilty!"

There is something mighty and sacred in a wife's love. She had deified him in spite of his faults, of his coldness, of his indifference. He saw in fancy her eyes riveted upon him with the old ardent devotion in them from which he had so often turned away impatiently. He heard her soft voice often adopting the pretty *patois* of the province, and her 'Eh, my Adalbert?' She had always lived so quietly, had been so grateful for every crumb of affection which he had thrown her, so happy at every tender word, so modest in her claims. Her little faults, her weaknesses, which he had at times thought intolerable, how small they looked to him now!

He stood at the window and recalled this day eleven years before. Then, too, they had feared for her life. He saw himself beside her bed,—beside the cradle of his first-born. She had lain there so pale, but her eyes had beamed; in spite of her weariness she had smiled proudly. He had given her only formal words of gratitude; all his interest had been for his child, the heir; she had but fulfilled her duty.—Suddenly he leaned his head against the window-frame and passed his hand over his eyes. Would they never come to say how all was going in the sick-room?

The entire castle seemed under a spell; the lamps burned dimly in the corridors, and lackeys were standing about with distressed faces. In the apartments below-stairs of the gentlemen-in-waiting conversation was carried on in undertones; in the nursery the governess and the nurse looked at each other sadly and significantly, and in the kitchens the servants

whispered together and told frightful stories. The head of the linen-room had distinctly seen the White Lady, in the moonlight, on the great staircase in the left wing, gliding along step by step slowly, and with her head bent, as the spectre was wont to appear when a death was imminent; and the old woman mimicked her, and the eyes of her audience grew large with terror.

Every one knew that a last attempt was making to save the Duchess's life, and Fräulein von Gerold's name was on every one's lips.

In Herr von Palmer's room sat Frau von Berg; she had been sent by Helena's illustrious mamma to fetch the Princess home, and had improved the opportunity to say 'good-evening' to her friend, to inquire as to the state of affairs, and to announce the astounding intelligence that the Baron, in presence of the Princess Thekla, had made application to the Dowager Duchess for his cousin's hand.

The stately woman was dumfounded. "If I only had the Princess safe in the carriage!" she wailed, rising and pacing the apartment to and fro, while Herr von Palmer grew very restless in his rocking-chair. "There is no knowing what folly she may not commit in an access of penitence."

Yes, the Princess,—where was the Princess?

The old linen-room woman had seen the White Lady; it had been the little Princess, and her bowed head and slow walk were due to her knowledge that her Highness was likely to die, and that Fräulein von Gerold was in peril. She had learned it from the broken phrases of the old dressing-maid, whom she had encountered talking with the linen-room-keeper, upon her return from the garden, into the depths of which her distress had

driven her, and where she had gone that she might for a while not even see the castle which misfortune was visiting through *her* fault.

Her faltering steps had carried her to the Duchess's drawing-room, and there she had seen the Duke standing by the window, and when he turned round she had perceived by the dim light that the handsome face, usually so cool and unmoved, wore a heart-breaking expression of misery, and the eyes showed traces of tears. It was more than she could bear!

In an instant she was on her knees before him, his hand clasped in hers, pouring out in a confused, indistinct way a flood of self-accusation, and confessing everything. He did not interrupt her; when she ceased, exhausted, he asked one question:

"The note, Helena? How in heaven's name did you come into possession of the only note which I ever wrote to Claudine, and which her Highness has evidently entirely misunderstood?"

"In it your Highness begged Claudine, *in spite of it*, to remain the friend of your wife."

"In spite of my having offended Fräulein von Gerold, —of course!"

"Cousin, cousin, punish me!" cried the Princess; "tell me what I shall do to atone——"

He shrugged his shoulders: "How did you come by the note?"

"Frau von Berg——" stammered the Princess, and sank on the floor. The Duke lifted her up, led her to an arm-chair, and, without another word, turned on his heel and left the room.

The operation was over ; the Duchess had regained some colour, and her pulse was stronger. Claudine's healthy stream of life seemed to have lent her fresh vigour : it was like a miracle. She lay sleeping softly, while the fragrant breath of the summer night was wafted in through the open window, and profound silence reigned in the room, save for the gentle, regular breathing of the sick woman.

Claudine was in her room, with her arm bandaged. She felt very weary ; it was not alone the consequence of the loss of blood, the exhausting agitation of the entire day now had its effect. Her limbs all but refused to sustain her, and yet she declined, with a persistence bordering on obstinacy, to lie down. She still had to speak with Baron Gerold, she said, and would then drive immediately home.

The old Duchess, who had followed her from her Highness's bedside to overwhelm her with thanks, entreated her like an anxious mother to postpone the interview ; she needed repose after the operation ; but Claudine persisted in her desire. "I cannot do things by halves," she declared, with unusual calm and great seriousness.

The professor, who was called to help to dissuade her, was wellnigh rude. "Well, then," said he, after his peremptory fashion, "let the interview take place, but the drive *must* be postponed. And now drink a glass of wine !" He held the glass to her lips with a look that admitted of no disobedience ; reluctantly she sipped a little. But when she heard steps in the corridor she turned to the old Duchess : "Your Highness will allow me to speak with my cousin alone."

The old Duchess withdrew, with a troubled shake of the head ; Frau von Katzenstein and the professor followed her.

"Good luck to you, my dear Baron," the Duchess whispered to Lothar, who bowed low as he passed her.

"No excitement, Herr Baron," was the professor's warning; "say 'yes' to everything, no matter what it may be."

He entered almost with impatience. He had been wandering restlessly in the park, where the footman sent to search for him had found him, and he had no suspicion of all that had been taking place in the castle. His startled gaze fell upon the bandage and the sling in which Claudine's arm hung, upon the loose morning-dress, the dishevelled hair, and the pale, changed face of the beautiful girl.

"What does this mean?" his eyes asked, but no word issued from his lips; he silently pointed to the bandage.

"A trifle," she replied, motioning him to a chair; "nothing more than a tiny wound made by the physician's lancet; some blood was needed for the Duchess. And now for the matter in hand, Baron."

"And you can speak of it as if it were nothing!" he exclaimed. "Do you not know that it might have been death?"

"You forget who conducted the operation; and if it had been——"

"You, of course, have no one in the world who would suffer from your loss; no one of whom you should first have asked, 'May I do it? Have I the right to risk my health, and possibly my life?'"

"Yes, one person there is," she replied,—"*Joachim*. But there was no time."

"*Joachim!*" he repeated, with the same bitterness that had characterized his previous words. "Was I not worth a thought?—I, who had just sued for your life for myself, for my child?" he asked, more gently.

Suddenly Claudine grew dizzy, and sank into the chair beside which she had been standing.

"I wanted to speak to you about that," she began, looking past him. "I promised the Dowager Duchess to assent; it shall not last long. You are so inexpressibly magnanimous, cousin. Indeed, I do not know how to thank you. I could do so fitly only by declining to take advantage of your magnanimity and——"

He stood motionless, looking at her.

"And that," she continued, "would be to decline to employ a means for lengthening the life of one who has been deeply injured,—so says the Dowager Duchess. Therefore I cannot do it; forgive me. But I have a plan: betrothal does not necessarily mean marriage. If the Duchess recovers, we can part; if she dies, of course we can do the same. It is only a measure for soothing her; a little heroic, I grant, but a betrothal is only a promise, and we all know that not every promise is kept. Heaven knows, many part before marriage; it is no disgrace. I—I——"

She had spoken more and more rapidly; now she leaned her fair head back among the cushions of the chair and closed her eyes. He had approached her, his features working strangely.

"I," she began again,— "I cannot leave here; but you, Lothar, you are free. After the announcement, which unfortunately cannot be avoided, of this betrothal, you can easily find a reason for visiting some distant place until——" And she suddenly sat erect. "I am not speaking for myself, God knows! Why should I? My clear conscience suffices me entirely. But that unfortunate woman,—do you understand, Lothar?"

"We are to play a farce, then?" he asked.

"Not for long! not for long!" she whispered, while

her lovely, weary eyes met his, as though beseeching forgiveness.

He clasped her right hand with a quick, passionate gesture. "So be it," he said; "but you are ill, and first, before the farce begins——"

"Let it begin immediately," she begged. "Go to the Dowager Duchess and inform her that I have consented. Meanwhile, I will make ready for the drive home. I am so tired, so worn out."

"I will go," he said, calmly, "and you will lie down; you will not drive home."

"But I will!" she exclaimed, angrily, and changed colour. "Do not forget that it is only a farce; that you and I can have our own way in spite of it."

He controlled himself and went.

'Say yes!' the physician had said, 'only—yes!' Claudine gazed after him as in a dream; she felt her strength leaving her; she was weak and humiliated. She would have liked to tear the bandage from her arm and let her life escape with the blood from the little wound. Involuntarily she plucked at it. On a sudden all sorts of colours danced before her eyes; everything wavered and grew indistinct; her chair seemed beginning to rock; she tried to steady it, and made a grasp in the air. "Stop," she whispered, but all about her seemed spinning furiously around; her head sank back, she felt herself lifted on high, and then knew no more.

The Sister who came to look after her by the physician's orders found her in a dead faint. With the noiseless dexterity of her calling, she soon restored the girl to consciousness.

"It is nothing but exhaustion, Herr Baron," said the little doctor, whom Lothar brought from the gentle-

men's rooms, where both physicians were sitting with the chamberlain. "Nothing more. Let the patient be perfectly quiet and undisturbed, and to-morrow she will be all right. How could it be otherwise, with such youth and health? Drive to Neuhaus without an anxiety, my dear Baron."

Herr von Gerold saw the waiting-maid himself, and enjoined it upon her to summon the Sister if there should be any change in Fräulein Claudine, and he then begged Frau von Katzenstein to see his cousin.

The old lady went immediately to Claudine's room to give him the latest intelligence of her, and he stood without, waiting. He heard Claudine's voice. With whom was she speaking? He could hear every word distinctly, for Frau von Katzenstein had left the door ajar.

"Forgive me!" was spoken loudly by the voice of the Princess Helena; not in a tone of entreaty, rather in that of command.

Lothar frowned; he had to put a force upon himself to refrain from entering instantly.

Frau von Katzenstein discreetly returned. "Her Grace is with Fräulein von Gerold," she whispered.

"His Highness has ordered me to beg your pardon, Fräulein von Gerold," the same voice spoke again. "Therefore I now beg you to forgive me. Do you hear?"

Indignantly the Baron crossed the threshold of the dimly-lighted room. The white face of the girl lying among the cushions of the lounge flushed crimson at sight of him.

"Oh, heavens!" she stammered, with a deprecatory wave of her sound arm. Her heart throbbed so violently that she could say no more.

It did not surprise her to have him appear thus in

her room; all that she thought of was the crushing blow about to fall upon the wayward little creature who had come so arrogantly 'to apologize by his Highness's command.'

The Princess had not perceived him; she stood like the embodiment of obstinacy. At sight of her whom she hated, all her self-reproach had turned to anger.

"You will not?" she asked. "I have not long to wait; I must return to Neuhaus. Mamma has sent Frau von Berg for me, but I shall not drive back with her,—I do not choose to; I shall ask Baron Gerold for his carriage. For the third time, then,—will you forgive me, Fräulein von Gerold?"

"I do not know, Princess, what it is that I am asked to forgive, but I do so with all my heart," Claudine replied, with quivering lips.

"Your Grace,"—it was Lothar who spoke, and his voice betrayed agitation,—*"this mode of begging forgiveness of one who has been deeply offended, and who is at present suffering, is surely new."*

The Princess turned as if from an electric shock. Claudine's eyes sought his in appeal; she held her breath. Ah, she knew from sad experience the terrible effect of the knowledge that one loved is lost to us!

"It needs all the kindness and magnanimity of my betrothed to grant the forgiveness asked by your Grace in so strange a fashion."

It was said. Entire silence reigned in the room,—everything swam before Claudine's eyes. What! could a man treat thus harshly her whom he loved, whom he had wooed for weeks? Was it done in despair at being forced to resign her?

She stretched out her hand. "Princess," she said, faintly, as if to ask forgiveness in her turn.

But the delicate white figure did not shrink, as Claudine had feared; the short curls were shaken back with a haughty toss of the head. "Accept my congratulations," she said. In the loud, forced voice alone could Claudine perceive the terrible agitation of the girl whose passionate love had just received its death-blow.

The Princess would not notice the hand extended to her. "Attend me, Baron!" she said, imperiously.

Lothar took the offered hand in her stead, and carried it to his lips; Claudine withdrew it hastily.

"No need," she said, turning her face towards the wall; "it is quite superfluous, after what we have agreed."

They were gone. Claudine rang the bell, and was undressed, and the candles were extinguished. Frau von Katzenstein slipped cautiously into the dark room and stood beside the bed. Nothing was stirring behind its curtains; the patient was probably sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. But as the old lady's eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she perceived the girl sitting up in bed.

"But, Claudine, are you not yet sleeping?" whispered her kindly old friend, kissing the beautiful face. "I have just heard of your betrothal. God bless this union of hearts, my dearest Gerold!" Then she quietly departed.

Claudine put her hand to her head. "Union of hearts!" she said, bitterly. "What a mockery!"

She pondered and reflected far into the night, until her thoughts grew confused. The most terrible day of her life was over. What misery and heartache were to follow it?

Early the next morning Claudine was roused from a profound sleep by a messenger from the Dowager Duchess bringing her a delicious bouquet and a diamond ring.

It pained her,—obliging her to remember the previous day,—and she rose by a great effort. The Duchess's waiting-maid appeared just as she was dressed, and summoned her to the sick-room.

With weary steps she crossed its threshold. The entire crimson apartment was filled with sunshine; the Duke was standing at his wife's bedside with the little Princes: the two younger ones had their hands filled with roses, the eldest held something that sparkled and shone.

The Duke approached her and kissed her hand. "Accept my most fervent gratitude and that of my sons for your eager self-sacrifice," he said, as he led her to the bedside. "See for yourself, Fräulein von Gerold, what an effect it has had!"

The Duchess held out her hands to her, while the eldest Prince threw his arms around her. "I always knew," he said, "that you were brave, Fräulein von Gerold, and this we give you, my brothers and I, for making our mamma well again."

He handed her a costly necklace, and the others held out their roses to her.

"Claudine," whispered the Duchess. She kneeled as she had been wont to do beside the bed, but she did not, as formerly, lay her cheek confidently against her friend's. She waited, like one of the old pictured saints in the castle chapel, with downcast eyes and immovable features. "Oh, why should you thank me? I have done nothing," she said.

The Duchess, unperceived by Claudine, made a sign

to her husband to withdraw. He softly left the room, followed by the two elder boys; the baby alone remained, sitting on the bed, playing with the roses.

"Thanks, Claudine, a thousand thanks! And take, too, my heartfelt hopes for your happiness in your betrothal; I learned it a while ago from mamma. It surprised me, Claudine. Why did you never tell me that you loved him?"

Claudine was mute; then she collected herself. If she played her part so ill, the entire scheme would be of no avail. Here, above all, she must be brave.

"It was so hard—so hard for me to speak of it," she stammered. "I did not know whether my love were returned."

The Duchess pressed her hand. "Claudine," she whispered, "do you know—I pity the Duke; he loves you!"

"No, no, your Highness!" exclaimed the girl; "he does not love me!"

"Yes, Claudine," the invalid insisted. "I had a note of his to you——"

Claudine started up: "A note? I never had but one note from his Highness, and that——"

"Hush!" whispered the Duchess; "I know. Yesterday I did not understand it; this morning Adalbert himself explained to me what it meant. He told me all; it was no easy task for him. I know everything, Claudine, and I pity him, for now you are lost to him."

"Elizabeth," stammered the girl, wellnigh unable to speak from compassion, "it was a mistake upon his Highness's part, and what human being——"

"Yes, a mistake! Oh, I understand, I can comprehend it; but all here has grown so quiet, so empty, Claudine." She laid her hand for an instant upon her

heart, and then stroked caressingly her friend's bandaged arm.

"Elizabeth," said the girl, "your nature is so kind and true, your judgment of others so kindly,—can you be severe in this case?"

The Duchess shook her head: "No, I have forgiven. The little span of time that is still mine to spend here must be passed at peace with every one. Ah, Claudine, for the first time since I have been his wife he talked with me early this morning as in my dreams and in my waking hours I have longed to have him, kindly and frankly, gently and cordially. It comes too late! Yes, yes; but it was so sweet, so dear! and so I have forgiven him. There is left in me only a very little,"—and she lowered her voice,—“only a very little silly vanity now. You see, I always longed to please him, and forgot what a poor, ailing creature I am. So I took up the mirror there and looked into it; it hurt a little at first, but then——”

She paused, and tears stood in her eyes as she forced a smile.

Tears which Claudine could not suppress rolled down the girl's cheeks.

"I am so sorry for him," the Duchess went on. "I will be kind and patient and loving to him. And there is another whom I pity,—Helena; she loves Baron Lothar."

"Yes," sighed Claudine.

"Oh, you lovely, God-endowed creature," said the sick woman, "before whom all hearts bow down! How good it must be to be so loved!" It sounded very sad, very hopeless.

Claudine rose and turned away to the window; she dared not show how wretched she was.

"I will not keep you any longer, Claudine," the Duchess went on. "You have so many, many duties to fulfil to-day. You must pay your betrothal-visit to mamma, and you must see the little one whose mother you are to be, and you will have so much to discuss with your betrothed. Go, Claudine, and God be with you!" She smiled; the baby Prince had pulled the lace cap from her dark hair, and was putting his open mouth to her pale lips. She hastily turned her face away. "My darling," Claudine heard her whisper, "mamma must not kiss you; mamma is ill."

The agitated girl could scarcely summon sufficient composure to kiss the transparent hand held out to her, and to leave the room calmly. In her own apartment she threw herself into an arm-chair, hid her face in her hands, and wept bitterly. The waiting-maid looked on in amazement. Was this the happiness that should attend a betrothal? The maid stooped and picked up a case that had just fallen from the lady's lap and had sprung open in the fall, disclosing to the servant's astonished eyes a wonderful diamond necklace. Claudine took no notice of it; all she felt was that the pretence in which she now had a share was intolerable.

At last she allowed herself to be dressed. As her yesterday's gown was ruined, she was compelled to wear the only other dress she had with her,—one of black lace, which she adorned with a couple of roses. They were as colourless, however, as her face, and their effect, like that of the white sling in which her arm hung, was not to brighten her toilette; the contrast with the black was too strong. Thus, upon Lothar's arm, she went to the Dowager Duchess's rooms, where, at the breakfast given by his Highness to the betrothed couple, they received the congratulations of the little court.

Early in the afternoon Lothar drove her to Neuhaus. All the servants on the estate were assembled on the hall steps, and greeted the young couple with a sounding hurrah! Beata stood on the threshold with outstretched arms, and a bunch of roses in her right hand, while beside her old Dora dandled the child in its white dress. Tears of joy stood in Beata's honest, laughing eyes.

"Dina, my darling," she cried, drawing the girl towards her, "who would have thought it?" And snatching the child from its nurse she said to it, "Here is a mother for you, you poor little thing, and such a mother!"

Lothar, with a glance at his silent betrothed, put a stop to all noisy demonstrations. "She cannot hold Leonie yet, Beata," he said, giving the child back to its nurse, and leading Claudine into the nearest room. "Do not tease Claudine with questions to-day, sister dear; let us have some refreshments, and then take a drive with us to Brötterode."

"But, Lothar, there is an open-air concert there to-day, and——"

"Just for that reason, dear Beata!"

His sister shook her head and went to give her orders. Then, whilst dressing for the drive, she murmured to herself, contrary to her wont, "I thought betrothed lovers liked to sit together in some quiet, secluded spot, and here these, who are by nature disinclined to noise and excitement, drive, on the very first day of their betrothal, directly among those slanderous tongues."

There was much connected with Lothar's betrothal which Beata did not comprehend to-day; her brain had been confused in the forenoon, when her Grace had taken so noisy and bustling a departure, and she had

not closed her eyes the past night. When, late on the previous evening, Lothar had driven home alone with the little Princess, her heart had seemed to stand still with dread ; true, she had only glanced at her brother's face, but she had been certain on the instant that he was betrothed, his look was so clear and serene, and the Princess ran up-stairs so hurriedly.

"She is going to confide her happiness to her mother," Beata said to herself. And, sure enough, Lothar called her into his room, and when she entered he was leaning against his gun-rack, in his favourite attitude when he had anything important to communicate to her. "Sister Beata," he said, coming to meet her, "I am betrothed."

She took his hand and kissed him on the mouth. "I congratulate you, Lothar."

"And you are not at all glad, Beata?"

"Lothar," she had said, "one always hopes when a brother marries to gain a sister; but"—and she had smiled good-humouredly—"you cannot possibly fancy your Beata a sister to the Princess? We should be like a good, honest domestic fowl and a golden pheasant, eh? But that is of small moment if you are only happy."

"I intend to be so. And although a swan may not be any better companion for a domestic fowl than a golden pheasant, I still hope the two will find pleasure in each other. I am betrothed to Claudine, my sapient sister."

To Claudine! No need to mock her wisdom, when affairs had been conducted so quietly. "Thank God!" she had said, when somewhat recovered from her surprise, and then she had taken her brother affectionately by the arm: "Sit down and tell me about it."

He had told her all that he could,—of the operation,

of the danger to the Duchess's life, of Claudine's courage and self-sacrifice, of everything save that which she longed to know. His was a reserved nature; no one was allowed to look into his heart; it was a Gerold family peculiarity.

While Beata was indulging in these reminiscences, she was taking out her prettiest bonnet, the one she had procured for yesterday's *fête*, and as she was putting it on she recalled the departure early this morning and the terrible scene in the nursery. Little Leonie was asleep in her crib after her bath, when her Grace the Princess Thekla had appeared, ready for her journey, followed by Frau von Berg, and had demanded nothing more nor less than—the child! Old Dora had planted herself broadly before the crib with outspread arms, and had declared in her *patois* that the master must first give his orders that the child was to go with its grandmother. Her Grace had so far forgotten herself as to try with her own illustrious hands to push the old peasant aside, but a sturdy woman of that class stands as firm in her place as does a fir in the forest.

"May God forgive me," the old creature had said, while resisting the high-born hands, "for so far forgetting the respect I owe to one of our Duke's family! And He will forgive me; I am doing my duty, and cannot let my master be robbed."

"You stupid creature," Frau von Berg had said, "who is robbing? Her Grace is the child's grandmother."

"I must have orders from my master," had been the reply.

"Your master is not at home; listen to reason."

But it was of no use; Dora had put her arms akimbo and had stuck to her post; all at once she had succeeded in reaching the bell-pull; many an impatient

peal it had rung, but certainly never so loud a one as to-day.

The nursery-bell had a familiar tone to the entire household; in that room its old master and mistress had lain ill and had died. No wonder that every one thought some accident had happened, and that Lothar, who had just returned from his morning ride about the estate, hurried along the corridor before all the rest, followed by Beata and a crowd of servants from every part of the house. He had sent away the servants and had closed the door behind himself and Beata.

"What is all this?" had been his first inquiry. He looked as if he could scarcely trust his eyes at sight of her Grace, who had not appeared at the breakfast-table on the plea of a headache, and who now stood here, with a crimson face, speaking in an imperious tone:

"I wish to take my grand-daughter with me, and this person——"

"Ah! Your Grace supposed me so absorbed by my betrothal that I should forget the hour fixed for your departure? Or, rather, your Grace did not wish to await my return, and preferred to depart by an earlier train. And your Grace wishes to take your grand-child with you"—his voice sounded like muttered thunder—"without first obtaining my permission? By what right, may I ask?"

"She is my daughter's child."

"And *mine*. A father's claim is rather stronger, it seems to me, than a grandmother's, your Grace."

"Only for a few months, Gerold," the Princess rejoined, beginning to see that her anger had betrayed her into committing a blunder.

"Not for an hour," he said, with decision, and his face grew a shade paler. "This child shall be guarded

from the poisonous atmosphere which is ruin for even the purest flowers; I will shield it from learning an early lesson of contempt for its kind. My daughter shall be trained as was formerly the fashion in my family,—simply, naturally, and in lofty modes of thought; and this must be done here, here in Neuhaus, your Grace, under the special superintendence of myself and my future wife.” And he drew close the curtains of the crib where the little girl was lying, with her startled eyes wide open. “Allow me to attend your Highness to the carriage,” he added, coolly.

The Princess walked to the crib, touched the child’s forehead with her lips, and then, without another word, rustled along the corridor to the hall, where the Princess Helena and the lady- and gentleman in-waiting were ready to depart. The old Princess got into the carriage with the most amiable of smiles upon her lips; Beata, who courtesied low, received a scarcely perceptible nod in return for her hospitality. Lothar sat opposite the ladies, as he had upon their arrival. When the horses started, a pair of black girlish eyes cast a long look at the old house, a look so filled with disappointment and remorse that Beata, in spite of her relief, felt her heart swell with compassion. Poor, wayward little Princess!

Beata was conscious of this as she stood before the mirror tying her bonnet-strings. She sighed. Thank God! thank God! there was peace in the house once more! Up-stairs, the bracing woodland breeze was clearing Frau von Berg’s rooms of the last traces of the penetrating scent of patchouli, and the housemaid had long since brushed up the remains of a costly glass vase which the old Princess had dashed upon the floor in her anger. In the linden boughs an end of

pale-blue ribbon was fluttering,—it had been blown there from the Princess Helena's dressing-table,—and on the lawn, beds and furniture were airing. To-morrow all would be as it had been before this visit, thank God!

“Forgive me,” she said, in her clear voice, as a few minutes later she entered her sitting-room, where Claudine was seated on the platform by the window looking out, and Lothar was standing before his father's picture, at the other end of the room, lost in thought,—“forgive me; I am rather late. Have they brought you coffee? Yes; that's right. Well, I am ready for our drive.”

She was rather dismayed, as she spoke, at finding the betrothed pair so far apart, and at the formal manner in which Lothar approached Claudine and offered her his arm as if they had been at a court ball:

“A drive in the air will do you good, Claudine.”

His measured tones almost provoked Beata.

“Please, Lothar,” Claudine replied, “give orders to stop at the Owl's Nest after our drive. I am longing for rest; I am still very weary.”

“Yes, of course; and we must pay Joachim a betrothal-visit,” was the reply.

It was a very silent drive. As the carriage rolled down towards the valley, where the red roofs of the little spa were visible, Claudine leaned back with a sigh. This, too! She had expected it: he wished to show her, rehabilitated, above all suspicion.

The strains of a waltz greeted them as they turned into the avenue before the small hotel. In the open square, in the midst of which stood the pavilion for the musicians, there were quantities of little tables covered with red-and-white cloths. All the aristocratic

guests were seated about a gigantic table, conversing, guarded by the Argus eyes of the head-waiter, who was bound to see that no unworthy addition was made to the party. In order to insure this, he was wont, three hours before the beginning of the concert, to lay on the table two primitive tickets inscribed 'Taken,' and to tip up the chairs. And if two only of the circle made their appearance, and ordinary mortals could not find a single vacant chair, he merely declared, with a shrug, "Extremely sorry, but these places are taken."

To-day, however, not a chair at the table was unoccupied; the conversation was very lively, and was all about the affair of yesterday at Altenstein. The story of the Dowager Duchess's displeasure was in every one's mouth,—of course much distorted, exaggerated beyond recognition. One version set forth how the old Duchess had ordered Claudine instantly to leave the castle; another told of her pension's being withdrawn; a third declared that the fair Gerold had insisted upon appearing at the dinner, and added, with significance, that the Duke was, after all, the sovereign.

Oh, incredible! How dreadful! And then the Duchess's hemorrhage! Poor creature! poor creature! The consequence, of course, of grief and agitation!

Of course, since Claudine had chosen to conduct herself so, the Duke could hardly be blamed. They shrugged their shoulders and smiled at the poor, betrayed wife, who had believed the girl to be her friend.

"Oh, terrible!" groaned an elderly Baroness; "it was just like the Gerold! How could it have been discovered?"

"I wonder what Baron Gerold thinks of it all? He looked like a corpse when the old Duchess turned the cold shoulder to Fräulein Claudine."

At these words there was a perfect confusion of tongues, suddenly followed by silence. Some one had remarked, "Why, there is the Neuhaus carriage!"

"True! And driving this way."

All had sufficient presence of mind to look as if they were talking of indifferent matters. The ladies fluttered their fans, and every eye was directed towards the approaching vehicle. The spirited horses danced excitedly at sound of the music; the coachman and footman on the box were in faultless blue-and-yellow liveries, and behind them?—

At the long table every hat was instantly lifted; the gentlemen arose, while the ladies nodded and smiled amiably.

What in the name of heaven?— Claudine von Gerold, her arm in a sling, sitting beside Fräulein Beata? And the Baron opposite her? Slowly, very slowly, the carriage passed the distinguished party at the table and stopped before the door of the hotel.

Two gentlemen from the table hurried towards it,— a young officer of hussars and the melancholy attaché. The lieutenant wished to inquire after the health of the Duchess, his illustrious neighbour at table at the Neuhaus *fête*, since he was 'sure Fräulein von Gerold would be able to give him the latest news,' etc. The attaché had other views. He came by her Excellency's whispered request, "Do find out what it all means."

"The Duchess is better," Claudine replied to the young officer's inquiries.

"But have you had an accident, Fräulein von Gerold?" asked the attaché, twirling his moustache; "surely you——"

"Only a trifling injury, Herr von Sanders," Lothar interposed. "In a day or two, I trust, my betrothed's

arm—— Oh, pardon me! I forgot to say that you are in presence of a betrothed couple,—betrothed since last evening. A surprise, is it not, gentlemen?—But, Claudine, here comes your glass of water; I hope it is cool enough.”

The gentlemen shook hands with the Baron, and congratulations and thanks were exchanged. Meanwhile, Claudine drank the water and handed back the glass.

“Drive on,” said Lothar, lifting his hat with a profound and grave inclination to those assembled around the large table. The next moment the swift wheels of the carriage had carried it on into the lonely forest road, while the final chords of the waltz were still trembling upon the sunny, fragrant air.

At the table before the hotel the clatter of tongues suddenly died away like the notes of the loud trumpets with which the waltz had ended. When conversation was resumed, how different had the tone become!

“Well,” the old Excellency declared, with dignity, “I always maintained there was nothing in all that gossip.”

“Good heavens, there is so much mere talk in the world!” sighed the sentimental Baroness. “Who began it?”

“Antonie von Bohlen wrote to me about it to-day,” said one of the pretty Countesses Pansewitz, “but she told me not to tell.”

“Never mind, tell us what she said,” her mother commanded, vexed at such unnecessary reticence.

“Claudine Gerold had an artery opened because the Duchess was bleeding to death, and her blood was transferred to the Duchess’s veins,” the Countess explained. “Antonie says the Duchess would else have

died. Oh, heavens! it is terrible! I never could have done it."

"Terrible! terrible!" exclaimed the ladies.

"How courageous! There's race for you!" cried the young officer, with sparkling eyes.

"Deuce take it, that's a girl to love!" his Excellency declared, for which speech he received a glance of stern disapproval from his august spouse.

"She looked exquisitely beautiful," said the melancholy attaché, more tragically than ever. "By Jove! why hasn't a fellow a couple of estates? That lucky Gerold!"

"He has sent in his resignation," said the young hussar, "and is going to devote himself to the management of his estates."

"What else do you know, Lolo?" the Countess asked her daughter.

"Oh, she had presents of quantities of diamonds," the girl further declared, "and the old Duchess treated her as if she were her daughter, and kissed and petted her."

"Ah, charming!"

"When are they to be married?"

"Of course they'll pass the winters in the capital."

And so on. In their inmost hearts they grudged Claudine her good fortune, but no one dared to breathe a word against Baron Gerold's betrothed. There were quite other murmurs borne upon the fresh woodland breeze, and the ladies unanimously agreed to present the betrothed maiden with a gorgeous basket of flowers in token of their gratitude for her succour of their beloved Duchess.

Meanwhile, the betrothed couple had reached the Owl's Nest. The house and garden looked peaceful

indeed in the late afternoon sunshine, and in its light the broken rosette in the convent ruin was tinted with rose-colour. Claudine's lovely face suddenly wore a look of distress; the arch of the old door-way of the house was hung with garlands of evergreens and roses.

"Lothar," she whispered, touching him lightly on the arm as she alighted, "I beg, nay, I require of you, —go home with Beata. I must first prepare Joachim. You shall hear from me when to come again. I cannot play a part here: it is beyond my strength."

He evidently underwent a brief inward conflict, but a glance into the despairing blue eyes conquered him; she was indeed suffering. He said not a word in reply, but turned and begged Beata to remain in the carriage. He escorted Claudine to the door of the house, and there kissed her reluctantly-yielded hand as little Elizabeth ran to meet her with a shout of joy.

"When do you want the carriage for Altenstein this evening?" he asked. "You will surely permit me to accompany you thither?"

Claudine turned on the threshold of the door and waved a farewell to Beata; in her agitation she had forgotten the kindly soul. But Beata did not see it; she was looking up at the window of the bell-room.

"Thank you, Lothar,"—Claudine's voice was low, but decided,—"I shall not return to Altenstein. I shall stay here. I will inform the Duchess of my intention. You do not believe it?" she went on, with a weary smile. "I assure you I really have not strength sufficient at present for the part I am to play. I tried bravely to do my duty to-day, did I not? Take pity upon me."

She inclined her head gravely and went into the house.

Fräulein Lindenmeyer came to meet her, almost falling upon the threshold of the door in the hurry of her joy. She had on the cap with red ribbons, and opened wide her arms.

"Ah, dear Fräulein Claudine, what a pleasure!" she said. "Oh, we know it, we know it! Who do you think told us? Old Heinemann's grand-daughter. But why did the Herr Baron not come with you?"

Claudine had to be embraced and kissed, to shake hands with old Heinemann, and to receive Ida's good wishes. At last she could go up-stairs. How hard it all was!

Joachim was sitting at his writing when she entered his room, and it took a moment or two to recall him to reality. Then he sprang up, went to her, and lifted her chin with a caressing hand. "My brave little sister—and betrothed? Look at me, my darling," he begged.

But she did not raise her eyes, and large drops were clinging to their long lashes. "Ah, Joachim! Joachim!" she sobbed, gently.

He stroked her silken hair. "Do not cry," he said, gravely, "but tell me what they have been doing to you over there."

And then the tempest of anguish and despair burst forth and would not be controlled. She did not spare herself, she disguised nothing of the humiliation that had fallen to her share, and against which her pride had rebelled so vainly. "And, Joachim," she declared, wildly, "the worst of it all is that I love him, and have loved him for years as only a girl can love. On the day that he stood beside the Princess Katharina at the altar I thought I could not live; and now fate throws my coveted bliss in my lap with a laugh of scorn and

says, 'There; but take care: it is only gilded,—it is not real gold. There you have what you have prayed for and wept for all these years!' Trust me, he has taken me, as he did the silver at the auction, at any price, because he would rather die than have the slightest stain upon the Gerold name; he has asked me to marry him for the sake of the family honour; for nothing else, nothing!"

She ceased, exhausted, but she continued to sob passionately.

Joachim made no reply; his hand still lay on her fair hair. At last he said, gently, "And if, nevertheless, he does love you?"

She rose on the instant and stood erect.

"Ah, God!" she said, and in her tear-stained face there was something like compassion for her brother's credulity. "No, you good, unsuspecting creature, he does *not* love me!"

"But if he should! He never was one to feign a feeling. You know he would rather bite out his tongue than tell an untruth. It was always so, Claudine."

"Yes, thank heaven," she cried, "he never dared do that. Do you suppose Lothar could make feigned love to me? Oh, no, he is not false. When I proposed to him that we should act this farce, it never even occurred to him to say that he should be distressed hereafter when we parted. No, he is honest,—honest to rudeness!" Suddenly she seemed to collect herself. "My poor Joachim!" she said, tenderly, taking her brother's hand, "I interrupt your work with my evil, evil tidings. Bear with me, dear; I shall grow calmer. I shall once more be your housekeeper, your good comrade. Oh, if I had only never left you! And gradually I shall overcome it all,—all, Joachim."

She kissed him on the forehead, and went into her room, bolting the door behind her.

The repose of this her own little home had the effect upon her soul of cool, fresh spring-water. She went from one article of furniture to another, as if to greet each one individually, and finally paused before the picture of her grandmother.

"You were so wise an old woman," she whispered, "and yet what a foolish grand-daughter did you train! Too late she purchases her wisdom with the happiness of her life."

Then she laid aside her lace dress, put on her simple gray gown, seated herself in the old arm-chair at the window, and gazed out into the darkening evening.

* * * * *

In the room below, little Elizabeth walked sadly around the spread table; it looked so pretty with the porcelain bowl filled with roses in the centre, the napkins which Fräulein Lindenmeyer had taken such pains to fold artistically, and the rose-wreathed chairs for the betrothed couple. And then the beautiful cake which Ida herself had baked. The child's fat wax doll too had on a new blue gown. Where were they all this while?

She ran into Fräulein Lindenmeyer's room. "When is the wedding going to be?" she asked, impatiently. She had supposed all this preparation heralded the wedding.

"Ah, my darling!" the old Fräulein sighed, looking at Ida, and shaking her head. "'Who knows,' " she added, with Schiller, "'what slumbers in Time's background?'" This was a very different quotation from the one the worthy soul had prepared for the betrothed couple:

"For when the Strong and Mild are pairing,
The Manly with the Tender sharing,
The cord will then be good and strong."

What kind of lovers were these? They did not even stay together on the very first day of their betrothal. Or was this the new fashion? In her day it had been different; then lovers sat together and looked into each other's eyes. She sighed.

"Clear away, Ida," she whispered; "the wasps are coming into the room after the cake, and it will get dry on the table. Ah, our lovely wreaths! It is the lot of all that is beautiful in this world! Ida, Ida, I feel far from pleased."

"Elizabeth would like some cake," said the child, tripping after the girl.

Heinemann was sitting on the bench before the house door, whistling a melancholy air; Ida was singing the words of it as she cleared away the table; they floated out sadly into the garden through the open window:

"Two turtle-doves were sitting
Upon the self-same spray:
When two fond lovers sever,
The flowers fade away."

They had no idea of how deeply this grieved Fräulein Lindenmeyer. The old lady put her head out of the window. "Be quiet," she said, in an undertone. "Heaven knows, that is no song to sing just after a betrothal; it sounds like frogs croaking."

Claudine, too, had heard the song. "'When they sever,'" she said to herself. "At least they have been united. But we——?"

The first snow in the mountains! It falls there early; on the plains the gossamers may still be floating, but up here it shimmers and gleams, and there is a white, glittering veil lying upon the pines. Then it is comfortable in human habitations; the huge tiled stoves do their duty; and the chinks of the window-frames are so stuffed with green moss that the cold wind can find no smallest entrance. It is delightful then, especially of an evening, when the light of the swinging lamp above the table falls upon the shining tea-service.

Nowhere among the mountains was it so comfortable, so cosy, so home-like, as in the dwelling-room at Neuhaus. It was a pity that the spinning-wheel, with its fleece of white wool, no longer occupied its old place on the platform by the window; it would have suited so well with the rest of the room. Outside there was a flurry of snow, within here the lamp was lit upon the old-fashioned writing-table.

Beata sat writing: "So much, Lothar, for the answers to your questions about the farm; now for other matters nearer your heart. I was at the Owl's Nest a while ago, and found Claudine in the sitting-room; she was giving little Elizabeth her lessons. I should like to send you some specially cheering news, but it is always the same. She never speaks of you, and if I begin upon the subject she gives me no reply, or none that is at all satisfactory. She seems interested only in one thing, and that is the Duchess's health. She lives like a nun, and looks wretchedly pale; her only diversion consists in long, solitary walks. Joachim, egotist that he is, either does not see it or does not choose to see it. I opened his eyes to-day, however. He brought to Claudine a thick pile of manuscript to be copied; I snatched it from him, and said to him,

‘If you please, I will attend to this; you overwork the poor girl.’ You know she has sent away Ida, and does everything herself,—cooks, sews, irons,—and all is well done. And in addition to the household work she is required to perform the duties of a copying-clerk and ruin her eyes. As if she had not spoiled them sufficiently with crying!

“Heaven knows, one scarcely sees her but that her eyelids are swollen, although whenever I ask her, ‘Have you been crying?’ she always replies, ‘I? what have I to cry for?’

“Joachim looked at me in surprise. I am convinced he was shocked at the idea of my thus prying into the mysteries of a poet’s soul. He tried to gainsay me, but it was of no use. He is one of those who must be dealt with resolutely; it is the only way to manage him.

“But forgive me for writing of Joachim when you long to hear of Claudine. You ask me if she wears her betrothal-ring. I know it will grieve you, but I must tell you the truth, Lothar. There is no ring on her finger. I asked her about it yesterday; she looked embarrassed, and made no reply. There is a stern line about her mouth which it pains me to see. You should have wooed her differently; but then, as matters stood——

“Sometimes I think that perhaps the Duke—— No, no, Lothar; I will not distress you; I am so ignorant of such matters; I do not even know what has passed between you, and I do not wish to pry into your secret. God grant that these clouds may roll off! One thing I am sure of; if they are not soon dissipated you will both be wretchedly unhappy. Sometimes I am on the point of interfering, and of asking, ‘What miserable squabble is this? One here, the other there. Do you

love each other, or do you not?" But you have forbidden me, and I refrain.

"I always take Leonie with me to the Owl's Nest, but *she* behaves as if she did not see the child, and it looks so fresh and hearty now. Joachim says it looks like a Spanish baby, with its dark curls and black eyes. Once when she thought I was out of the room I saw her pet and kiss the child, but as soon as she was aware of my presence she was the same as ever.

"Frau von Katzenstein wrote lately to Claudine that the Princess Helena was with the Duchess at Cannes, and was tending the invalid with the most unselfish devotion; the Duchess, too, praises her in her letters to Claudine. Her Highness writes almost every day, and Claudine answers regularly, but the correspondence seems to give her no pleasure. She even looks impatient, at times, when the post brings her a scented envelope bearing the ducal scutcheon. The illustrious lady asks in every letter, 'When are you to be married, Claudine? Why do you say nothing in your letters of your betrothed and your happiness?' And sometimes an orange-blossom is enclosed in the note. What Claudine says in reply I do not know, but I infer from the constant repetition of the question that she does not answer it at all.

"Good heavens, this is a long letter! And I shall write still more this evening, for I mean to begin copying Joachim's manuscript. I have looked over it; it is the second part of the Spanish 'Experiences of Travel.'

"What else would you like to know, Lothar? Only ask, and I will answer you frankly. Do not let time hang too heavy on your hands in your lonely castle in Saxony. God grant there may be some improvement in the Duchess's condition! They say the poor creat-

ure is restless, and filled with longing for her German home and her children. Yesterday she sent some roses to Claudine. One of the poor exiled buds is in a glass of water on my table as I write, and it seems to gaze in surprise at the snow drifting against the window-panes. It is dancing down outside unceasingly in the darkening night. What a noiseless hurly-burly it makes! I send you one of our baby's curls.

"Princess Thekla has really taken Frau von Berg into her household; did you know that? And did you know that the Duke did not take Herr von Palmer with him to Cannes? It is strange. He used not to be able to do without him."

She addressed the letter, and was about to go to the nursery—it was just the time when little Leonie had her supper of porridge, which Beata, like a faithful foster-mother, never omitted to taste—when Heine-mann was announced.

"Well," she asked, when the old man entered in his pilot-cloth coat and high boots, his fur cap in his hand, "what is the matter at the Owl's Nest?"

"Thank God, nothing! But we have had a telegram. Fräulein Claudine must leave by the night-train, and she sent me to ask Fräulein von Gerold for a sleigh to drive to the station."

Beata instantly gave orders for the sleigh to be got ready, and then with her own hands poured out a glass of cordial for the old man. "I will drive over," she said, "and you can get up behind."

"Yes; Fräulein Claudine bade me beg you to do so, and I forgot," he murmured.

In less than a quarter of an hour Beata was driving through the snow-clad forest. What in the world had happened?

The Owl's Nest rose gray amid the white firs, and the lighted windows cast crimson gleams abroad into the night. Fräulein Lindenmeyer received her in the hall; she looked distressingly solemn, and her eyes were swimming in tears. She clasped her hands and whispered to Beata, "The Duchess is dying."

Beata flew up-stairs and into Claudine's room, where she found the girl hurriedly packing a small trunk.

"Good heavens," exclaimed Beata, "are you going to Cannes?"

"Oh, no: only to the capital; the Duchess wishes to die at home." She clasped her hands before her face and burst into tears.

"They are bringing her back, then? Ah, merciful heavens! My dear Claudine, do not cry; dearest child, you must have known that it was only a respite, that apparent improvement."

"There lies the despatch from Frau von Katzenstein, Beata; the Duchess expects to find me in the capital when she arrives to-morrow evening; the despatch is from Marseilles. I wanted to beg you to look after little Elizabeth now and then, Beata; Joachim is so absorbed in his work, and Fräulein Lindenmeyer grows forgetful. I thought of writing for Ida, but Fräulein Lindenmeyer tells me she has gone to a situation."

"Let your mind be perfectly easy," said Beata, with some impatience, as she helped her cousin to put on her wrap. "Make yourself warm enough, and——"

"But leave the child here in the Owl's Nest," Claudine interrupted her. "Joachim is so used to have Elizabeth go up to him in the gloaming and sit on his knee while he tells her stories."

"Of course," Beata replied. "But what I wanted

to say, Claudine, was——” She hesitated, then added in a low tone, “Do not forget the betrothal-ring.”

Claudine turned, startled. “Oh, yes; you are right,” she said, sadly, looking for the ring in a little casket.

Fräulein Lindenmeyer stood weeping beside Beata in the hall, while Claudine took leave of Joachim.

“Ah, heaven, so young to die!” sobbed the old Fräulein, who in her grief could recall no suitable quotation. “Away from her husband and children, far out in the world. God grant she may reach her home alive!”

“God grant it!” Claudine repeated, half unconsciously, as she drove off beside Beata into the snowy night.

Beata insisted upon seeing her cousin safe in the railway-carriage; she took almost maternal care of her brother’s betrothed. And when the lighted train had vanished into the night, she drove home absorbed in very grave reflections. The sleigh-bells sounded strangely solemn in the forest: all else there was so noiseless; she thought of the express-train speeding through the land bringing home the invalid Duchess. She must be very, very ill to undertake the journey; it could only be because she wished to die at home. And she thought of Claudine’s tears. What a meeting awaited the two friends! When the Duchess left Altenstein to go to Cannes she had fainted. And now the last parting was at hand.

Claudine, too, was thinking of her illustrious friend as she rode on alone. Travel with such a goal is terrible. So soon! echoed in her heart. Yes, they had all known that only a short respite could be granted the sick life, but the end was coming too quickly! The future was dark indeed before the girl, darker than the night outside.

She had but a short distance to go before there must be a delay of two hours at Wehrburg: the winter trains were very inconvenient. There were the lights of Wehrburg already; the train went more slowly, and stopped at last. She alighted and went through the draughty station to the waiting-room, where, without raising her veil, she quietly took her seat in a corner.

Not far from her sat whispering together a gentleman and a lady, the latter, like herself, irrecognizable in a thick veil, although the movement of the head seemed familiar to Claudine. Of the gentleman she could at first see nothing save the short, strongly-grizzled hair. He wore a costly fur coat; his hat lay on a seat beside him. He was bending over a railway-guide, and when he turned a leaf a large diamond glittered on his finger. Nothing is drearier than waiting for a train at night in a poorly-heated, dimly-lighted waiting-room. Involuntarily one scans any fellow-sufferers, and wonders who they are, whither they are going, and what are the relations between them. Are they husband and wife? or father and daughter?

Claudine, in the midst of her melancholy reflections, looked now and then at the pair who, with the sleepy railway-porter, shared with her the discomfort of the waiting-room. The lady was talking eagerly, in a low voice, her head quite close to her companion's. The gentleman showed a degree of restlessness that was almost impatience.

"Nonsense!" Claudine heard him say in French. "I have told you a thousand times that I am going to Frankfort and am then coming back."

"I do not believe you," the lady said, in an angry.

whisper. "But I shall do as I told you; deceive me, and you know the revenge I shall take."

"That will do you no good, my dear."

"This will never do," she declared,—more loudly, perhaps, than she meant,—and her small clinched fist struck the table. The gentleman soothingly laid his hand upon it and looked round in alarm.

Claudine's veil was too thick; it entirely concealed her face and her astonished eyes. That was—good heavens! that was Herr von Palmer, and—of course only Frau von Berg could hiss so when she was angry. The abundant hair was hers, and the full figure. What in the world——?

"Please tell me," the gentleman said, tenderly, "what should I do over there without you, *m'amie*? Be reasonable, and do as I ask you."

Just then a train whizzed up to the station; the windows shook slightly. The bell rang, and a porter opened the door with, "Passengers for Frankfort-on-the-Main!"

Herr von Palmer arose hurriedly. "Stay here!" he said, angrily.

"I shall not deprive myself of the pleasure of accompanying you to your railway-carriage," she said, sarcastically; "who knows when I may enjoy your society again?"

He made no reply, but hurried out, followed by the lady.

Involuntarily Claudine rose and went to the window, just in time to see Herr von Palmer disappear in a first-class carriage. The lady stood beside it, wrapped in her furs. The train moved off, and she then returned to the waiting-room. For an instant she scanned Claudine's veiled figure, then threw back

her own veil and ordered a cup of tea and the newspapers.

Yes, the thick veil had concealed the painted face of Claudine's enemy.

Herr von Palmer was probably going to meet their Highnesses, but what could cause Frau von Berg such anxiety? Perhaps Beata was right; they stood in close relations to each other, and this passionate woman was jealous.

At last came Claudine's train. She waited to see which carriage Frau von Berg would take; there were only two first-class carriages in the train. She walked towards the one not selected by the lady; a porter opened the door for her. She hesitated for an instant; a gentleman was its sole occupant.

"Is there a second-class carriage empty in which smoking is not allowed?" she asked.

"No, madame; there are five gentlemen and a lady in it, and in the ladies' carriage an entire family of children."

She hesitated no longer, but entered by the door which the porter still held open and took her place at the window. The gentleman was sleeping in a corner; there was nothing of him to be seen but fur and a purple railway-rug. Well, the ride would not last long, —two hours at the most. She leaned her fair head in its dark fur cap back against the cushions; she was very weary, but her sad and restless thoughts did not allow her to sleep. The Duchess was going to die; she should lose a faithful friend, and gain—her freedom; as soon as the last funeral torch was extinguished she would return his ring to Lothar, and could then breathe freely. Her chest heaved; the mere thought of this free breath pained her. Ah, the life that was to follow!

So colourless, so monotonous, the life of an impoverished woman of rank, doomed to become in time a monosyllabic old maid. The life of one forgotten! And suppose Joachim should marry again? What if, in addition to all lack of joy in her life, she should be forced to consider herself a burden? And if Beata should leave the quiet Paulinenthal at a husband's side? Ah, no! Joachim would always remain to her; he *must*. Where could he, in his seclusion, in the midst of his laborious existence, find time to play the wooer? Joachim and his child would always be hers. It was a sinful lack of courage to doubt it. She had more, much more, than many others!

She sat erect and looked at the tracery the frost had left on the window-pane. Then she started in mortal terror. In the rumbling and creaking of the train, which was just leaving another station, she had not perceived that the gentleman in the corner had risen and had come over to her. She was first made aware of it by feeling something brush her wrap. She looked round; before her sat Lothar.

"It is really you?" he said, cordially. "Recognized in spite of the veil! But of course!—Where else could be found that golden hair? And you, too, are going to the capital?" His eyes shone with delighted surprise. Involuntarily his right hand had been extended, as if to clasp hers; he had taken off his fur cap; now, as if to conceal some embarrassment, he put it on again.

Claudine sat like a statue. She had collected herself very quickly.

"Yes," she replied, keeping her hands clasped in side her muff. "The Chamberlain von Schlotbach telegraphed to me that their Highnesses would arrive to-morrow morning, and so I set out immediately."

"But tell me, how is all going on in the Paulinenthal?"

"Well," was the reply.

"And my little one?"

"She is well, I believe."

"You believe?" he asked, with a bitter emphasis.

For a while both were silent. The train stopped; the snow outside crunched beneath heavy footsteps; a carriage door was opened and shut; the bell rang, the engine whistled, and the train rolled on.

"Claudine," he began, with hesitation, "I wrote to you the day before yesterday. The letter will reach the Owl's Nest early this morning."

She inclined her head slightly, without looking at him.

"I was in a fearful state of mind," he went on. "Imagine me in that old, scantily-furnished castle, two hours' drive from the nearest town, completely snowed up. Fancy me wet to the skin, just returned from deer-stalking, sitting opposite a smoking fire that will hardly burn, the snow falling outside, and so lonely, so terribly lonely in the dreary pile. In addition I have actual visions: I see the Neubaus sitting-room, see my little one playing there, hear her shouts, and think I perceive the fragrance of roast apples,—sure to be found there at this season of the year." He paused a moment. "And then,—then I think, 'Good God! why do you sit here so sadly?' At such a moment I roused myself the day before yesterday and wrote to you on the spot to ask you——"

She interrupted him: "Why ask? I cannot force you to keep your promise, and I never desired that you should go to Castle Stein. You could surely have gone to Berlin or Vienna or Paris, or to some large city even more distant."

He let her finish her sentence, and then went on calmly, "I wished to ask you, Claudine, if this farce is never to end. It is surely wrong——"

She started up. Was he in earnest?

"You say this to me now," she exclaimed, indignantly,—“now, when the decisive moment is at hand? The poor Duchess may perhaps not live twenty-four hours longer. Are you in such haste to regain your freedom?"

"You are very bitter, Claudine," he said, reproachfully, and there was something of compassion in his tone, "but you are right. In view of the sad days, to encounter which we are both going, we ought not to speak of such things; nevertheless——"

"No, no! do not speak of it," she urged.

"Nevertheless, I cannot do otherwise," he went on, undeterred. "Her Highness has finally appealed directly to me." He took out his letter-case and handed her a letter. "You had better read it yourself."

Claudine made a gesture of refusal.

"It is a note written by the Duchess's own hand," he went on, without withdrawing the paper. "The poor lady is embittering her last hours with needless anxieties. If you will allow me, cousin, I will read it to you."

Scarcely glancing at the girl's pale face, he began:

"MY DEAR BARON,—After a long inward struggle a dying woman writes you these lines, praying your aid, as far as is possible, in an affair of great delicacy.

"Answer me truly one question, the indiscretion of which you will forgive when I am no longer among the living. Do you love your cousin? If your suit for her hand was merely an act of prudence and mag-

nanimity, then, Baron, restore her freedom to the poor girl, and be assured that you will thereby insure a happy future to the two people dearest to me on earth.

“ELIZABETH.”

Claudine's blue eyes gazed in despair at the small sheet of paper. Merciful God! what did it mean? Was the Duchess still possessed by the old delusion that her husband loved *her*, or she him? Or had the Princess Helena confided in her, and did the Duchess wish to intercede for Lothar and for her?

“And you?” at last came brokenly from her lips.

“I am on my way to take my answer to the Duchess, Claudine. You yourself know, I trust, that it was quite needless for the Duchess to ask me to speak truly. I have all my life acted frankly; once only did I countenance a deception, because my sense of delicacy robbed me of the courage to speak, because I thought honour bade me redeem my word, even at the sacrifice of the happiness of my life. No more of that. That past is buried. Since then no considerations have ever prevented me from acting in accordance with my convictions. I shall briefly explain to her Highness that——”

A low cry interrupted him; Claudine extended her hand to him imploringly, her eyes gazing into his own with an expression of intense pain. “Hush, hush; I am not the Duchess!” she stammered.

He paused at such an entreaty, while the girl sprang up and took refuge in the opposite corner of the carriage.

At this moment lanterns glided past the window; the train went more slowly; in the melancholy dawn of a snowy morning the Baron recognized the railway-

station of the capital, and the ducal fortress looming grim and gray above the town.

Claudine had alighted before he had time to assist her. A lackey in the ducal livery awaited her with a carriage. As she was hastily entering it, Lothar stood at the door. In the cold gray light of morning his face looked changed: he seemed to Claudine to have grown years older in the last two months.

"I pray you, cousin, appoint some time when I may have an interview with you," he said, courteously, but decidedly.

"To-morrow," she replied.

"Not until to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," she repeated.

He retired with a bow, and a few moments afterwards passed in the clumsy hotel-omnibus through the southern gate of the town by the same road along which Claudine had been driven rapidly in the ducal equipage.

"What," he thought, distressed at her extraordinary demeanour,—“what if the Duchess should be right, after all, and she should actually love the Duke? What if I should be absolutely indifferent to her,—absolutely indifferent?”

He had always prided himself upon his comprehension of women; he thought he knew Claudine. To-day, for the first time, he was assailed by grave doubts.

Claudine drove up the steep castle hill and alighted at the portal of the wing inhabited by the Dowager Duchess. The rising sun tipped with crimson the steep snow-covered gables, the towers and walls of the ducal

residence, and at the same moment the ducal banner was displayed on the tallest tower in the city below, still lying in gray twilight, in token that its mistress was returning to her home—to die.

Claudine found a couple of rooms in the second story prepared for her, and in the course of the forenoon the Dowager Duchess sent for her. The kindly old Duchess's eyes showed traces of tears; she was sitting at the familiar window, gazing abroad over the roofs of her dear city into the snowy distance. Oh, how often Claudine had sat here before her in the snug room, with its stiff, costly furniture dating from the time of the First Empire, and the many, many pictures on the walls, enjoying the magnificent prospect with her ducal mistress! At the present moment neither had any eyes for its beauties. Their gaze was directed to the spot where the railway emerged from the forest,—the railway upon which the train was bringing home the poor invalid.

The Duchess had had another hemorrhage at Cannes, and had but one desire,—to see her children once more, and to arrange various matters before her death. The little Princes had been left at home: their presence was thought to be too exciting. The physician had forbidden their accompanying her to Cannes, although she had declared, "Herr Doctor, I shall die of longing for them!"

The old Duchess gently shook her head as she told Claudine all this: "It is hard, terribly hard for Adalbert: they had come to understand each other thoroughly, and were on the way to be the happiest couple in the world. He writes most tenderly of her,—and now?" She sighed. "God only knows what lies before us!"

Their Highnesses had forbidden anything like a reception of them, but the old Duchess wished to drive to the station with the eldest Prince, and she asked Claudine to accompany her. About two o'clock they drove down the castle hill; a melancholy November sky canopied the city, and large snow-flakes were falling. But in spite of the weather hundreds of people lined the street leading to the railway-station.

The Duchess's landau stopped close by the door of the ducal waiting-room; the police kept off the crowd which silently thronged the place. All stood quietly in a large circle about the carriages. Several gentlemen were on the platform; the express-train which was to bring the Duke and Duchess had already been signalled. At last it whizzed into the station, and there was a stir and bustle on the platform. The Duke was the first to alight; he kissed his venerable mother's hand, and then he himself lifted his suffering wife out of the carriage. All looks were directed to her pale, emaciated face, as her large eyes eagerly sought the Prince. She embraced the old Duchess and kissed the boy with a sad smile. "Here I am again," she whispered, faintly. She could hardly walk the few steps to the waiting-room, supported by the Duke and the Prince; kindly but wearily she acknowledged the greetings of the crowd. The Princess Helena with her lady-in-waiting, Frau von Katzenstein, and the gentlemen of the suite, followed her immediately.

When she saw Claudine her face worked; she beckoned and pointed to the carriage.

The girl hurried towards her. "Ah, your Highness," she stammered, much moved, bowing over the extended hand.

"Come, Dina," the Duchess whispered, "drive with

me; and you too, my darling," she said to the Prince. "Adalbert will drive with mamma." And when she had been lifted into the carriage she said, as they drove through the crowd of men standing silent and respectful, with bowed heads, "Bow, my child; bow very kindly; they all know how ill I am."

She herself made an effort to lean forward, and lightly waved her white handkerchief.

"The last time! the last time!" she murmured. Then she clasped the girl's hand: "How good it is to have you here!" Arrived at the castle, she dismissed her friend: "When I have taken a rest I shall send for you, Dina."

Claudine went to her quiet room, and looked down into the wintry court-yard, which had suddenly lost its solitary aspect. Equipages were driving up and away, sentinels were posted, and the great luggage-vans were slowly toiling up the hill. Down below, the bells of St. Mary's Church were ringing, perhaps for a wedding; here and there lamps were already lighted in the early twilight, and it was snowing, snowing incessantly.

Hours passed. Claudine's tea was served in her room. Leaning back in an arm-chair, she watched the little blue flame beneath the tea-kettle, and thought of Lothar, and how he had described his loneliness and longing in the deserted castle in Saxony. Oh, yes, it is hard, very hard, to be alone with torturing thoughts, with terrible uncertainty. Uncertainty? She felt almost angry with herself. Good heavens, she was only too certain!

The Princess Helena looked well; her face had a changed, pleasanter expression. The restless, passionate look had left it; she hoped,—her hope was well grounded.

Wherefore had the Duchess summoned her hither? Ah, it was very plain. After receiving Lothar's reply, she would say to her, "Claudine, be generous, give him back his troth! He feels himself bound!"

She knew well that *he* never would dissolve the tie between them. He relied upon her magnanimity. A passionately defiant mood possessed her. "What if I refuse? What if I prefer being wretched with him to being wretched without him? Who can prevent me?" She shook her head. "Oh, never, never! No!"

The old-fashioned clock on the console struck nine. The Duchess must have been too much fatigued to-day; there was no longer any hope of seeing her. She grew cold suddenly in the dim room; the little flame beneath the tea-kettle had long been extinguished; there was only a feeble red light from the dying embers on the hearth. She began to pace the room to and fro; she would wait until ten o'clock, and then go to bed. Perhaps she should be able to sleep. But before ten o'clock the waiting-maid came for her to go to the Duchess.

She passed along the corridor and up and down various staircases until she reached the well-warmed and well-lighted vestibule at the entrance to her Highness's apartments. She had rarely been here formerly. At the entertainments given in the castle she had accompanied the Dowager Duchess only to the state apartments, and she had endeavoured to avoid attending her Highness's small social receptions. But to-day she again experienced the charm of those magnificent rooms. Everywhere walls, carpets, and curtains showed the same sumptuous red; everywhere the light in the hanging lamps and candelabra shone through veiled crimson shades; everywhere were groups of rare

exotics, and everywhere were brilliant pictures in rich frames.

"Morbid! feverish as the spirit that inhabits these rooms," had once been the comment of his Highness, who, accustomed to the pure woodland air, felt smothered in this heavy, fragrance-laden atmosphere. There was a degree of truth in his words. An ardent desire to decorate bare reality, a longing for life and happiness, found expression in the arrangement of these apartments.

The Duchess was lying on a low bed hung with crimson in her bedroom. The curtains fell from the ceiling, where their folds were sustained by the claws of a gilded eagle. Here, too, the same crimson light was diffused, tinging the invalid's cheeks with a mock hue of health.

"It is late, Dina," her Highness said, in a husky voice, "but I cannot sleep; I hardly sleep at all; and I cannot be alone; I am afraid. I have had the curtains arranged so that I cannot see the door: I am possessed by an inexplicable terror lest something frightful should cross the threshold—our family phantom, the White Lady—to tell me what I already know, that I must die. Do not laugh at me, Dina; I used to like to lie in the dark. Now tell me, Claudine, tell me everything; before long I shall not be able to hear you. How have you been, Dina? Tell me!"

Claudine felt for an instant as if she must rush from this luxurious room with its gilded ceiling and its atmosphere filled with the odour of May flowers from the conservatory.

"I am very well, Elizabeth; I am only distressed for your suffering," she said, sitting down beside the bed.

"Claudine," the invalid began, "I have so many things to write about and to arrange, and when my father and sister are here,—they are to arrive shortly,—and if that stifling pain comes again it will be too late. Help me with it a little."

"Do not excite yourself unnecessarily, Elizabeth."

"No; oh, no; but please, Dina!" And she turned her emaciated face towards the girl and looked at her from large and unnaturally brilliant eyes, as if to read her friend's heart. "You are so strange a betrothed maiden, Claudine," she whispered after a while, "and the time since your betrothal has passed so strangely,—he in one place, you in another. Claudine, confess you sacrificed yourself when you said 'yes' on that terrible day! You do not love him, Claudine."

She hung upon the girl's looks with an expression of devouring anguish.

"Elizabeth," said Claudine, after a pause, clasping her hands upon her breast, "I love Lothar, and have loved him from the time when I scarcely knew what love was,—when I was hardly more than a child!"

The Duchess was silent, but her breath came quickly.

"Do you not believe me, Elizabeth?" asked the girl in a low voice.

"Yes, I believe you, Dina. But does he love you? Tell me, does he love you in return?"

Claudine cast down her eyes. "I do not know," she stammered.

"And if you knew that he did not love you, would you still marry him?"

"No, Elizabeth."

"And could you not then consent to bestow your hand upon another who loves you inexpressibly?"

The girl sat like a statue without replying.

"Claudine, do you know why I have come back?" asked the Duchess, with passionate emotion. "I have come to try with my last breath to insure a coveted happiness to one who is dearest to me on earth. When I went to Cannes my silly weakness, my wounded heart, were still struggling with my better self. Claudine, the Duke loves you; he never has loved me. He loves you with all the truth and fidelity of which his noble heart is capable. In all these years of our married life I have learned to read his features, and he loves you, Dina, and he never will forget you. Do not sit there so mute and unmoved; for God's sake answer me!"

"You are wrong," Claudine exclaimed, in great distress,—*"you are wrong. His Highness no longer loves me; it is a delusion on your part. You must not attach any importance to such phantoms of your brain. You should not have returned for this."*

"Do you suppose, Dina, that love can be put off like a garment?" asked the Duchess, bitterly; "that one can decide—as one does about taking a walk, for instance—that from such and such a day there shall be an end of it? The heart is not to be so controlled."

There was a pause. Then Claudine said, in a low and resolute tone, "I shall never marry, never without love on both sides; never! Forgive me, Elizabeth, I cannot make you any deceitful promises. Ask anything that you will, my life if it may be, but not that,—not that."

The Duchess gazed past Claudine with tearful eyes. For a while there was silence in the apartment.

"Poor man! I thought I could arrange it all so beautifully," she said as if to herself. "It is not to be!"

Then in a louder voice, "Such a complication!—you love Lothar, and he—poor little Princess!"

"Elizabeth!" exclaimed Claudine, her pale lips quivering, "I never will stand in the way of his happiness,—what can you think of me?—never! never! Do me one favour," she went on, hurriedly: "in my name give him back his freedom. I know you are going to speak to him upon this subject."

"To-morrow," said the Duchess.

"Then give him this." She drew the betrothal-ring from her finger. "Here is happiness for the Princess; take it, and—let me go my own way alone, far from everything that can remind me of him."

She started up and hurried towards the door.

"Claudine," the Duchess's weak voice entreated, as her transparent fingers closed upon the ring,—“Dina, do not leave me so! Who is the poorer of us two? Rather help me to evolve some happiness for some one out of all this pain.”

Claudine returned. "What else shall I do?" she asked, with resignation.

The Duchess asked for water, then took a portfolio from the table beside the bed and handed the girl a folded paper.

"It is a memorandum of the little mementos which I wish distributed after my death. Keep it: it is a copy. The Duke has the original."

"You must not agitate yourself so, Elizabeth."

"Oh, I shall be calmer when everything is arranged, Dina. Read it aloud, that I may know that nothing is omitted. No one must be able to say, 'She forgot me.'"

Claudine read in trembling accents. Sometimes tears rendered the writing illegible; everything was ordered

with such tenderness; it all bore witness to so ardent and affectionate a nature.

"To my dear Claudine I give the Brussels lace veil which I wore as a bride——"

A burning blush suffused the girl's distressed face; she knew what was meant.

"Take it back! take it back!" she sobbed, kneeling beside the bed.

"Oh, how sad! how sad!" said the Duchess. "You and he, both wretched! You two,—my best beloved on earth!"

Claudine kissed the invalid's hot hands and hurried away; the misery she was undergoing was too intense.

In the conservatory, beneath the magnolias and palms, her tears flowed freely; the soft splash of the fountain soothed her wild despair; in a few minutes she had so far recovered herself that she could say 'good-night' calmly; but when she peeped through the silken curtains the invalid was lying apparently asleep, and the girl could perceive lines of pain about the mouth.

In the anteroom Claudine met the old Medizinalrath, who greeted her kindly.

"Is the end really so very near?" asked the agitated girl.

"As long as there is life there is hope, Fräulein von Gerold. But, humanly speaking, her Highness's life is liable to cease at any moment,—to be extinguished like the flame of a candle."

Claudine involuntarily pointed to her arm: "Herr Doctor?"

"Ah, Fräulein Claudine," said the old man, with emotion, "that can no longer avail. All has gone here!" And he put his hand on his chest. "I am going

to the Duke to report as to her Highness's condition," he said, in an undertone, as he walked beside Claudine along the corridor. "Moreover, his Highness found a very unpleasant surprise awaiting him here. Have you heard of it? Palmer has disappeared, leaving affairs in the greatest confusion."

"He went by rail to Frankfort last night," said Claudine, startled. "I saw him at the station at Wehrburg, and supposed he was on his way to meet their Highnesses."

"The scoundrel!" murmured the old gentleman. "He is far enough out of reach by this time. Meet their Highnesses? What put that into your head, Fräulein Claudine?"

"I heard him speak of it to Frau von Berg." Claudine paused; the whole matter suddenly became clear to her.

"They are a match!" the physician said, with a laugh. "I will mention what you tell me to his Highness. To-morrow, be sure, we shall hear that the Berg has also disappeared, leaving things in sad confusion behind her. 'Tis not well to be malicious, but indeed it serves her Grace right; the protection extended by her to that creature was most extraordinary. Good-night, Fräulein Claudine."

The old doctor was right. The next morning every one in the castle knew that Frau von Berg had suddenly disappeared. The only 'confusion,' however, that she had left behind her consisted of a bundle of letters addressed to the Duchess and a note for his Highness. But the guardian angel keeping watch—in the shape of Frau von Katzenstein—at the door of the sick-room suspected that the contents of the packet could hardly be satisfactory to her Highness, and calmly handed it

over to the Duke. The old lady presented herself in his study just as he was looking over some papers with a very angry frown, while the chief of police stood by.

The Duke probably thought that Frau von Katzenstein came to bring him tidings of her Highness; instead of which the old lady gravely handed him a bundle of letters tied with a sky-blue ribbon, the topmost one bearing the address, in a hand extremely like his Highness's own, of Frau von Berg.

The Duke turned pale.

"And this was to be handed to her Highness?" he asked, with emotion, gazing blankly at these witnesses to a gay bachelorhood, when there were frequent suppers at Herr and Frau von Berg's, and baccarat afterwards in the pretty woman's blue drawing-room. This creature, who had never even breathed the atmosphere of the same room with the woman whose few days of life she had tried to embitter, had dared thus to disturb a death-bed!

"I thank you, madame," said the Duke, deeply moved, throwing the letters into the fire burning on the hearth, and tossing after them the other papers which he had been looking over. Involuntarily he brushed off his fingers with his pocket-handkerchief after thus getting rid of the obnoxious documents. "Let the scoundrel go, Herr von Schmidt," he said, contemptuously, with a friendly gesture of dismissal to the chief of police.

After the man had departed the Duke paced the room to and fro in much agitation. One of the letters, a very small note, still lay unharmed on the hearth; the Duke perceived it after a while and picked it up. It was in Herr von Palmer's familiar handwriting.

"Yesterday evening," it ran, "I was sent with a note from the Duke to the fair Claudine ; I stole it from her as I handed her into the carriage. Herewith I place the precious document at your disposal, to be turned to such account as your acute intelligence may suggest. I am sure that my dearest friend will know how to lay the train so skilfully that the two ladies so kindly disposed towards us shall be blown sky-high——"

"Palmer was at work there too, then!" His Highness smiled bitterly, and thought of the hot-blooded, dark-eyed girl into whose hands had been given the match to apply to this train. The mine had exploded ; its first victim lay dying, and—the criminals had escaped.

That cunning rogue had certainly contrived to cheat and betray with so smiling and natural an air that the consequences were extraordinary. There was not an official, not a servant connected with the court, whose pay was not in arrears, not a purveyor who had received a penny for the last two years. The Duke's agents had their hands full in discovering what was owing. All sorts of tradesfolk presented their accounts as soon as Palmer's flight was made known. The Duke laughed angrily when he heard the details.

The Dowager Duchess, so scrupulously exact in all money-matters, was indignant at being obliged to pay twice for a landau which had been built for her, and her annoyance was much increased by the thought of how placidly she had repeatedly driven in this landau past the place of business of the manufacturer who had in vain dunned Palmer for payment. The entire capital was outraged, and in thought devoted the scoundrel to the gallows ; but such sly birds usually go scot-free.

Claudine was told much of this by the maid; it scarcely aroused in her the most fleeting interest. She could think of nothing save what to-day might bring her,—the decision of her future fate. The Duchess was reported as no worse; she had slept for several hours, but had not yet summoned her friend.

The girl stood at the window looking out at the gray November sky. It was still snowing. The sight of the dreary world outside further depressed her spirit, already sorely burdened. Suddenly she blushed,—a carriage rolled into the court-yard and drew up at the portal of the wing occupied by the Duchess. It was *he*. Lothar's tall figure vanished in the vestibule. He had come to give his answer to her Highness!

She could scarcely stand, in her agitation; what right had a ray of hope to intrude upon her anguish? Every word he had spoken to her since he saw her for the first time after his return, in the garden at Neuhaus on the day when she had gone over to tell Beata of the discovery of the wax, had been offensive,—sharp as polished steel. He had mistrusted and contemned her whenever he could; no, no, he did not love her! Once, only once, her heart had foolishly throbbed high with delight,—on that dark summer night when he had ridden to the Owl's Nest to gaze up at her window; there had then been one moment of intoxicating happiness. But it did not last; it had simply been a military habit with him to make a tour of inspection; he had wished to convince himself that the family honour was safe!

She turned away from the window and went to the table, where her breakfast was still standing. She poured out half a glass of wine and put it to her lips: she did not like wine, but she felt at the moment so deplorably weak. A low knock at the door caused her

to put down the glass before she had drunk. "Come in" was so faintly uttered that it could not possibly have been heard by any one outside. Nevertheless Frau von Katzenstein opened the door and came into the room with an air of grave friendliness. She had brought with her a basket covered with white tissue-paper.

"My dear Gerold," she said, kindly, "her Highness has just commissioned me to give you this." She put the basket on the table and approached Claudine. "The Duchess wishes to see you in half an hour," she added, pressing the girl's hand. "Forgive me for not staying any longer. I cannot leave the invalid."

"How is she?" Claudine asked.

"She does not complain to-day; she says she has not nearly so much oppression," replied the old lady, still out of breath with mounting the stairs.

"And you took the trouble to come yourself!" Claudine said, absently; but Frau von Katzenstein had left the room.

Claudine scarcely noticed the basket; in half an hour she should know whether he had taken back her ring; surely she should be told the truth?

She began to wander restlessly about the room. Then she went to the window. The guard had just been called out; the Duke was driving across the court-yard in a sleigh; two other sleighs were following him. Was he trying to escape anxiety and annoyance? She too felt a desire to run out into the park, to cool her hot forehead in the snowy air, to walk till she was weary and could find forgetfulness in sleep. She paused mechanically before the basket the Duchess had sent her; it was probably some gift procured for her at Cannes; her Highness was so fond of giving to those whom she loved.

She lifted the paper a little; she must know what the gift was for which she should thank her friend in a few moments. The basket was lined with blue silk, and in it, upon a folded fabric of costly lace, lay a spray of blossoming myrtle drawn through her betrothal-ring. . . .

The pale, panting girl was on the staircase in an instant; she hurried along the corridors, and not until she had reached the antechamber to her Highness's room was she conscious that her strength was all but exhausted. In the antechamber the Medizinalrath was whispering with Frau von Katzenstein. The old lady pointed towards the next room and laid her finger on her lips. "Her Highness is taking a little sleep," she said, softly.

As in a dream Claudine passed on to what was called the Duchess's study,—a small room wainscoted with costly foreign woods, and with walls covered with antique pressed and gilded leather. The book-shelves and writing-table were of dark oak; heavy curtains and rugs, and the busts of Goethe, Shakespeare, and Byron, lent it a home-like air. On this gray day the light here was dim; a glass door, the curtain of which was half drawn aside, led into the conservatory, and at this door stood Lothar, contemplating with apparent interest a spray of blooming yellow roses.

His back was turned to Claudine, and involuntarily the girl retreated to a recess formed by the book-shelves, where she could neither see nor be seen; she could not meet him as yet, and she shrank back into her place of refuge, her heart beating fast. She would not have the ring, which she believed had been returned out of compassion. Ah, she knew he did not choose to break his promise; nothing should induce

her to keep the token of a word so given. She was looking about her for some means of escape, when the hard voice of the Princess Thekla fell on her ears.

"Well, Baron," it said, "here you are at last! Do you know that I am quite vexed with you? You have been here since yesterday, and have not let us see you at the Red Castle."

"It certainly was wrong, your Grace. But I found so many things to do, and, besides, one does not usually pay visits upon his wedding-day."

"Wedding-day?" the old lady repeated, with a shrill laugh. "This is a poor time for jesting, with the Duchess mortally ill! Really, Lothar, you are sometimes quite incomprehensible! Do you not know that her Highness may die this very day?"

"What? your Grace imagines that I could indulge in so untimely a jest? Nothing is further from my mind. I myself was startled at first, but the Duchess desires that our marriage should take place to-day; with my betrothed's consent, of course."

"I congratulate you, Baron. And why should your betrothed not consent? She was very ready to be betrothed, and marriage naturally follows a betrothal. 'Tis a strange caprice on her Highness's part."

"Strange? Is it so strange that her Highness should wish before she dies to see the happiness of two people safely moored in port, secure from all the snares and perils to which it is exposed so long as those two are not united? I confess it does not seem to me extraordinary. I am grateful from my soul for this 'strange caprice.'"

"You did not always find protection so necessary, Gerold. Since when have you felt so weak? You knew how to defy my opposition when I refused you

the hand of my daughter. Since when have you so dreaded the right of the stronger,—let us say the right of the more powerful? Or——”

“I fear no honest enemy,” he replied, slowly. “Your Grace is aware of the fabled magnanimity of the lion. I do not fear him as a foe; I fear the gliding serpent, whose venomous bite can be given before its victim is aware of danger. I cannot protect her who is to be my wife from malicious slander unless she is mine in reality, for I fight here with unequal weapons. In spite of my years of court life, intrigue must always be an unfamiliar tongue to me; I might as well be required to read fluently and translate an Assyrian inscription. And I fear, your Grace, that I shall never learn it, even from the most striking examples.”

But the Princess did not seem to understand him. “Or,” she repeated, continuing her sentence undeterred, “are you anxious to secure your betrothed’s fidelity by placing it, so to speak, behind the bolts and bars of a matrimonial vow?”

“Your Grace is partly right,” he replied, courteously. “I am indeed anxious, not about the fidelity and firmness of my betrothed, but because I do not yet know whether she has forgiven the audacity with which, in my distress, I attempted to force a ‘yes’ from her.”

The old Princess laughed: “Really, *cher Baron*, one might almost suppose that in the case of your not procuring the forgiveness of which you speak you could be tempted to take your own life, or to commit some other desperate deed.”

“Take my own life? No! I have a child to whom my life belongs; but I should be a wretched, solitary man, your Grace, for I love my betrothed with my whole soul.”

Claudine advanced a step or two towards the door, but she paused. She could see the Princess in her black fur-lined cloak,—could see how the broad fan-palm beneath which she was standing waved gently, and how her sharp, sallow face changed colour, as if with disagreeable surprise. The girl leaned for support against the carved end of the book-shelves as she heard her Grace say, in a tone of extreme contempt,—

“Your love for this lady, Baron, is no guarantee in my eyes for the excellence of character of one who is to be my grand-daughter’s step-mother.”

“Your Grace,” was the quiet reply, “probably wishes to hear me declare again that I claim for myself the sole right to decide as to Leonie’s training. I gladly assume the responsibility. She who is to be the child’s mother is, in my eyes, the noblest, the best, the most unselfish of God’s creatures! Never, even in thought, has she swerved from the path which honour prescribes that a woman should pursue; never. This I know. In her love for her invalid friend my betrothed may have forgotten that a thousand malicious, envious tongues were ready to misconstrue and to slander; in *my* heart she stands, therefore, all the higher. It is easy, your Grace, to play the part of an honourable woman before the eyes of the world; but alone, with no support but the courage of a good conscience, to defy that world, knowing that it could crush us; to be firm in what we know to be right, conscious that we are falsely judged; to be steadfast in performing, under all circumstances, every duty prompted by honest affection, even although such duty should be that owing to a friendship regarded with suspicion by many; to be and to do all this, your Grace, requires purity of heart and strength of char-

acter, qualities which I have hitherto sought in vain in——”

“Lothar!” Claudine called out. The glass dome of the conservatory swam before her eyes, the ground beneath her seemed unsteady. Then she felt an arm thrown about her, and “Claudine!” sounded in her ear.

“Do not be so hard,” she whispered, “not so hard. The thought that others are vexed and angry suits so ill with such a flood of happiness as now overwhelms me!”

They were alone. She looked up at him with her blue eyes swimming with tears. “Not a word,” she said, laying her hand upon his lips,—“not a word, Lothar; this is not the time to be happy. I know enough, and death is very near us.”

“You will not oppose the wish of the dying?” he said, entreatingly and humbly.

“I will not oppose it.”

“And we will go back to our quiet Neuhaus, Claudine?”

“No,” she said, resolutely; “oh, no! I will not leave, as long as she lives, one who has suffered so much because of me. I have no more fear, for I know now that you and I belong to each other forever,—that you trust me and believe in me. And you,—you will travel meanwhile. Once more I send you from me; and then, when you return,—when my heart can again rejoice, when I can feel that I have a right to be happy,—I will come to you.”

Towards evening there was a marriage in the Duchess's apartments. All in the castle knew it, from the

head of the linen-room in her snug quarters in the garret to the seullery-boy who was fitting himself in the cellars for his future career. They all knew that immediately after the marriage the bridegroom had set out upon a journey, and that Frau Claudine von Gerold had taken her place at the Duchess's bedside.

Her Highness was very weak this evening. She had been present at the ceremony, and had with her own trembling hands fastened the bridal veil upon the girl's fair head. His Highness, the Dowager Duchess, and Frau von Katzenstein had been the other witnesses of the marriage, and in their presenee the young couple had taken leave of each other.

And now beside Claudine at the foot of the bed sat a graceful little figure, and both had been weeping. After the marriage ceremony the Duchess had fainted, and the Medizinalrath had gone to the Duke and had whispered to him to be prepared for the inevitable.

The end was very near.

Outside, the snow-clouds were rent asunder and the stars glittered down upon the wintry earth. The swinging lamp in the Princes' nursery cast a pale gleam upon their fair heads as they slept soundly; they were unconscious. But for the rest there was no sleep this night. The lights from the castle gleamed abroad over the snowy landscape, and below from the houses in the town many a prayer ascended for the kindly, compassionate sovereign now on her death-bed.

His Highness was pacing the antechamber to and fro, now and then pausing to glance into his wife's bedroom. All at once a low voice spoke: "Adalbert, has Claudine gone?" The young wife noiselessly approached her friend. "You are still here?" the Duchess asked.

"Let me stay with you, Elizabeth," Claudine begged. "Lothar has so much to arrange before I can go to Neuhaus."

The Duchess smiled feebly: "You do not know how to lie, Claudine; I know why you are staying. Poor child, what a melancholy marriage! Call Adalbert. Is Helena there?"

The Princess came and stood close beside Claudine.

"Take each other's hands," the Duchess entreated.

Princess Helena grasped the hand extended to her. "Forgive me," she whispered, with tears.

"And now call Adalbert."

He came and sat on the edge of the bed. She mutely pressed his hands when he fervently implored her forgiveness.

"If I could only live to comfort you, my poor Adalbert!" she whispered. "It is so hard,—renunciation,—I know it. But—they loved each other, and you—you have nothing! Ah, if I had the power, how happy you should be!"

"Do not talk so," said he. "I shall be unhappy, my Liesel, only if you leave me."

"Say 'my Liesel' once more," she begged, and as she looked at him her eyes, that had wellnigh dimmed in death, gleamed with the old fervent light of love.

"My Liesel!" he whispered, in a broken voice.

She pressed his hand. "Now go, Adalbert. I want to sleep. I am so tired. Kiss the children;—go!" she insisted.

And she fell asleep.

The wife of a few hours sat faithfully watching beside her. Once only invincible fatigue seemed to weigh down her eyelids for a second,—it could hardly have been more; she roused herself with a shiver.

The Duchess lay there strangely still, with folded hands and a smile upon her lips.

Claudine took her hand. "Elizabeth!" she said aloud, in distress.

Her call was unheard.

The Princess approached and sank down beside the bed sobbing. And the Duke came, and the physician, and the old lady-in-waiting.

It was so quiet, so oppressively quiet, in the gorgeous room.

Then all left it save the Duke and Claudine. They sat beside the dead, and through the open windows of the next room floated in the deep tones of the church-bells announcing to the land on this cold, dark winter morning that its Princess was sleeping the eternal sleep.

Hepaticas were blossoming in the garden at the Owl's Nest, and crocuses were peeping out of the black earth. Old Heinemann was working away at his rose-bushes, stripping them of their winter coverings and tying them to green rods. The noonday sun had been hot upon the old grave-stones, and the young leaves were stirring in their sheaths, longing for light and air.

The old man was doubly busy to-day; he had asked for leave of absence on the morrow, to go to Altenstein to be present at his grand-daughter's marriage to her former lover.

Behind the bright window-panes appeared Fräulein Lindenmeyer's kindly face; sometimes she turned towards the interior of the room to speak to Ida, who

was there arranging linen. Ida was established here now, by the desire of young Frau von Gerold, who was to remove to Neuhaus. When? No one knew; the Herr Baron was away, and his young wife was still in deep mourning for the Duchess.

Claudine's small feet were strangely restless to-day. She had been through the entire house with jingling keys; had looked over every chest and linen-press; had inspected the master's wardrobe and that of the child; had made up her household accounts and arranged for its future expenses. She shook her head at her own unrest: she could not understand it; she could not collect her wits sufficiently to write, nor could she compose herself for the hour at the piano to which she usually looked forward with such pleasure. At last she decided it would be best to take a walk. Moreover, she had not seen Beata nor the little one at Neuhaus for a couple of days; she would go there; Beata might know something more of Lothar's plans: by the last accounts he was in Italy.

By Claudine's desire, they had not written to each other. "We can tell each other everything," she had said, entreatingly, "and it will be so much more delightful. I can hear from Beata that you are well, and of where you are."

She put on her wrap, tied a lace kerchief over her head, and went up to say 'good-bye' to Joachim.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To see Beata, Joachim."

He had risen, and was looking at her affectionately. "How soon you will be going away to stay!" said he.

"When I think of forsaking you at some future day I seem to myself perfectly faithless."

"Oh, my darling, you cannot dream of how glad I

am to know you happy!" And he went with her to the garden gate. "Are you going alone?"

"I am not afraid, Joachim." She turned him back, and went away silently. Twilight was beginning to reign beneath the trees; clouds were flying swiftly across the skies, but the wind driving them was mild and tender; it waved back the veil from the young wife's forehead, and bent the budding boughs towards one another; it swept over the new grass on the edge of the path, and told of coming glories, of the splendour of blossoms and sunshine. She hurried on as fleet and light of foot as if she had had wings, looking down for a while at the sparkling brook beside her, which was carrying away the last snow-water from the mountains, and anon up into the clouds above her, while smiles from time to time replaced the earnest expression on her fair face. Once she said half aloud, "What if he were there!"

At the entrance of the Neuhaus park she paused; the breeze was rustling the boughs of the lindens in the avenue, and the castle lay dark and quiet. For an instant maidenly timidity stayed her steps; blushing, and with her heart beating, she leaned against the stone gate-post, not venturing to set foot inside the garden. Again she thought, "What if he were here!" No one had perceived her as yet; that was well! She suddenly felt as though she must turn and go back.

On the instant she withdrew among the trees on one side: a horseman was riding rapidly along the avenue. She recognized him in spite of the gathering darkness; she knew whither he was riding, and a sensation of inexpressible bliss possessed her. But he must not see her. Then she gave a low cry,—Lothar's setter, which had been leaping wildly about his horse, had recognized

her and rushed towards her. The next instant the horse was reined in, and the rider flung himself out of the saddle and clasped her in his arms. "At last!" he said. "It is you! thanks! thanks!"

She could not reply: she was crying. Then, as they slowly walked towards the house, she found voice to say, "I felt that you were here, Lothar. When did you come?"

"Fifteen minutes ago, my love."

"Where were you going?" she asked, with a smile that became wonderfully well her earnest, lovely face.

"To you, Claudine," he replied, simply.

Again she smiled blissfully: "Now I must tell you, Lothar, how I have always loved you. God be thanked for inclining your heart to me!"

"Inclining my heart to you?" he said, with emotion. "I have loved you from the day when I saw you so unexpectedly in the Dowager Duchess's rooms. Do you remember, you sang Mozart's 'Violet'?"

"And after that, 'Wilt thou but be mine own.' Do I remember? But, Lothar, if you loved me then——"

"Ah, do not ask, Claudine; such a wretched, gloomy time lies between now and then,—years of more suffering than I can speak of."

She was silent, and looked up to the clouds again, clinging closer to his arm. The dog walked beside her, and behind them came the horse, led by the bridle in Lothar's hand.

"One thing more," she whispered, timidly, looking up into his face. "Lothar, if you loved me, why did you hurt me whenever you could by such harsh, unkind words, humiliating me so in my own eyes that I was wellnigh driven to despair?"

He looked at her with a smile: "Oh, child, because

I was tormented by distress and jealousy, because my heart was sick with longing for you, and because I saw what was coming; because I knew the world and its vileness, and knew how you would be crushed when slander and calumny assailed you; because you, obstinate child that you were, made it so desperately difficult for me to watch over you; and, finally, because you *would not* understand me. Hush, hush, Claudine; those times lie far behind us. I have you now, and I may care for you and guard you in the future. Thank God!"

"Thank God!" she repeated, gently.

The horse walked off alone, with a hanging head, to the stables; the pair walked up the hall steps together. Baron Gerold opened the door. "Enter your house, Claudine," he said, with emotion; "it, and not the outside world, shall be our home, if you wish."

She laughed amid tears: "If I wish? Do you not trust me yet? I wish for nothing more in all this world."

Three years have passed. In Joachim's study, on a winter evening, in the twilight, sits Frau Beata, talking with her husband.

"Where is Elizabeth?" asked he.

"Dear heart, you grow more absent-minded every day! Where should she be but at Neuhaus, of course? She really cannot live without her aunt Claudine, and she coaxed me until I sent her over there with Heine-mann. It is so lovely in the Neuhaus nursery, and anything as sweet as Claudine's baby never was seen. She ought to be at home again soon."

"Have you read the paper to-day?" she asked, after a while. "No? Then you have missed a deal of news. Let me tell you, Joachim. First, the report of the betrothal of our Duke to the Princess Helena is confirmed. I am very glad of it, Joachim, for, with all her waywardness, the girl is good at heart. She was so devoted to the Duchess at Cannes, and she cannot do enough for Claudine to show her contrition. I am quite sure that her marriage will not be one of passion, for she has not, I suspect, yet forgotten Lothar; she will marry the Duke because she will think it her duty."

"I hope she will make the Duke happy," Joachim said, contentedly; "it is terribly dreary to live without kindly eyes to look into and a tender hand to clasp." He took his wife's hand and kissed it.

Frau Beata laughed, the same fresh, silvery laughter that had once scattered his ideas; she had forgotten the short, hard laugh she formerly sometimes indulged in. He cannot understand how he could ever stigmatize as 'barbarous' any one with so childlike and warm a heart. He confessed his fault to her on one occasion. She only laughed heartily and said, "I am not good for much save housekeeping, and you looked down upon me from your mental heights; but I liked you dearly then, you and your poems, and I hungered then for something to beautify existence. But no one thought it of me. And so I became a very demon of housekeeping."

Some such thoughts fill her mind now; she sits for a while as in a reverie, then rouses herself with, "Thank God, that's all past. Listen, Joachim." She goes on with her news: "The paper reports that Lothar has bought back Altenstein, and the sapient reporter says, 'Probably Baron Gerold wishes in the future to endow

his second son, born a few months ago, with the ancestral home of his family. In the mean time, we hear, the castle will be occupied by Joachim von Gerold, to whom it formerly belonged.' How wise people are! We never shall do that, Joachim; you cannot persuade me to leave the Owl's Nest; I have been and am too happy here."

"Yes, yes," he said, hastily, "we will stay here, Beata; we have quite room enough since the addition was made, and it is so quiet and peaceful. I hope the Neuhausers are not thinking of asking us to move?"

"Heaven forbid, Joachim! They are thinking of nothing save themselves," said Beata, gayly. "I mean no reproach; are we any better? Do you know, dear heart, that to-day is the anniversary of our betrothal?" she chattered on. "Ah, see how you forget everything! Yes, two years ago to-day we were sitting at Elizabeth's bedside; the crisis had just passed, and we knew the child's sleep was the first step towards recovery. And we whispered together of death and of immortality. You read me the poem you had written after your wife's death, and said how lonely you were with Claudine away, and how forsaken the child was—and——"

"And then I asked you, Beata——"

"And I said 'yes.'"

"And then I learned who it was that had secretly bought in my library for me."

"I certainly," she said, with a laugh, "always had a perilous sympathy with the dreamer, the most impractical, helpless mortal on God's earth." She kissed him and took up her basket of keys. "I must pay old Fräulein Lindenmeyer a visit," she said, by way of excuse for leaving him; "she wants to see me, and she sits

there so patiently in her arm-chair—good old creature—knitting socks for Claudine's children. She must have a chest-full by this time."

As she goes down-stairs the hall door is flung open, and a child, a girl, comes running in, loosening her hold of Heinemann's hand to fly to meet the smiling figure that pauses in the hall and catches the child in her arms.

"Little romp!" she says, with maternal pride, taking the rosy, childish face between her hands. "Was it delightful at Aunt Claudine's, little daughter? What did you play? And was Uncle Lothar at home?"

"Yes; but Uncle Lothar was angry, and so was Aunt Claudine," the child said, with a troubled glance at Heinemann.

The old man had taken off his hat, upon which flakes of the first winter snow-storm were glistening, and was shaking it.

"Were they not, Heinemann?" the child asked, in some distress.

"Oh, they had a terrible quarrel!" the old fellow said, with a sly twinkle in his eye as he glanced at Frau Beata; "and before me, too. Just as I came in to put on our child's cloak, because the sleigh was waiting, the Baron said, 'You will put on your grandest gown, Claudine, and go with me to the capital to his Highness's wedding. I should like to see if I can still be jealous,'—that's what he said."

"And then," the little girl interposed, "Aunt Claudine was sad, and said, 'As you please, Lothar.'"

"Of course!" the old man assented. "And then it all began. 'No, as you please,' cried the Herr Baron. 'No, just as you say, Lothar.' 'No, you are right, Dina; what should we do there? We will stay at

home.' 'But suppose I want to go, Lothar?' 'Oh, I know you, Dina; we shall stay here.' And so they went on quarrelling, madame, until at last——"

"Well?" Beata interrupted him, "which of them was victorious?"

"The one who always conquers, madame, when married people quarrel. The Frau Baroness, of course. She sends a great deal of love to madame, and on the day when our Duke marries she invites the Herr Baron and herself to come over to the Owl's Nest to have a cup of tea and to talk over old times."

THE END.



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